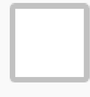
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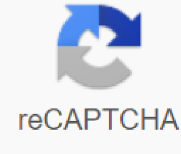

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Calendar for year 2019 / 2020 united states

Home/Exclusives/William Brinson on Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip CaputoIn leaves Grass, Walt Whitman celebrates races and nationalities in America, making a thousand varied contributions to the nation's single identity, its ever-unified land. Comparing Americans to the pages of a multi-branched tree, he invites his poem readers to collect himself a bouquet of incomparable beetles from those countries. Looking back on it, I think that's what I do when I recently made the longest road trip of my life: accepting whitman's invitation, gathering bouquets. Pulling a rented, antique Airstream trailer behind a pickup truck, I traveled with my wife, Leslie, and our two English setters, Sage and Sky, from the southern point of the continental United States, Key West, Florida, to the north within reach by road, Deadhorse, Alaska, on the gray shores of the Arctic Ocean.Four of us drove through 18 states and northwest Canada, past more trees and with wider skies than we ever imagined. We baked at temperatures in excess of 100 degrees for weeks, witnessed spectacular lightning and hail from the Midwest, and eventually drove through the snowfall. The circuitous road back to home in Connecticut took us down to Texas, where we handed the Airstream back to its owner. Overall, we covered 16,241 miles in just under four months. Some friends and relatives said I was nuts to try such a monumental journey at my age of 70. But I have been inspired by the memories of the day in 1996 when I was in Kaktovic, a settlement on windswept Barter Island, just off Alaska's north coast. I was surprised that its Students of Inupiat Eskimo pledged allegiance to the same flag as the children of Cuban immigrants in Key West, 6,000 miles away. Two islands further away, except New York City are from Moscow and still part of the same country. It seemed almost miraculous that a nation so vast, people of almost every race and ethnicity and religion on earth, managed to stay in one piece. What, I wondered, holds the U.S. together? Years after that Alaska trip, I was asking myself a variation on this issue. Was the nation holding together as well as it once was? From reading and listening to the news, I had the impression that Whitman's increasingly united land was fragmented into a patchwork nation of red and blue states where no one could agree on much of anything. But how accurate was that impression? As Leslie and I left Key West, I decided to learn by asking everyday Americans the same question I'd put to myself: What kept us together? I spoke to over 80 people: white, Latino, African American, and Native American. They came from all walks of life, including a politician in Florida and another alaska, a farm woman in Missouri, wrangler montana, college kids living in commune in Tennessee, an ice road trucker, and a taco entrepreneur who was also a Lakota Sioux shaman. William Brinson on Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip CaputoWhen Leslie and I arrived in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, that the city and most of northern Alabama are still recovering from a deadly tornado that had hit one day about a month earlier. Parts of Tuscaloosa looked as if they were carpet bombed. We volunteered to help with relief efforts. The coordinator of the volunteer center told us that more than 14,000 people from almost every country in the union had pitched in He asked us to write our initials on acetate-coated maps of the U.S., which showed volunteers in home countries. Do I want to discover the power that binds atoms of America to each other? Perhaps I was looking at it: a spirit that had moved thousands of men and women to travel long distances to help fellow citizens in distress. We were awarded an angarlike warehouse where we were buffeted by industry fans who were all useless with 102 degree heat. We loaded boxes of food, medicine and clothing along with about 20 other volunteers, mostly young people from church groups. The volunteers were white; their supervisors, from the Seventh Day Adventist disaster relief services, were black. It's Tuscaloosa, where in 1963 Governor George Wallace promised his inaugural speech: Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever! William Brinson on Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip CaputoT two weeks later, after sojourning in Mississippi and Tennessee, we camped on Meramec Farm, in the green Missouri Ozarks. It belongs to Carol Springer, a compact blonde who creates cattle and horses on 470 acres. The farm has been in her family for seven generations. As we sat in her kitchen sipping lemonade, she gave me her opinion on what makes the unum of our national motto, E pluribus unum: Glue is a belief that is not clearly defined: that we have more in common than not, that we are more similar than we are different. I'm not sure it's true, but the important thing is that we believe it is. In other words, I ask, perception becomes a reality? Springer shrugged. I've been aware that I'm going to get home in the dark rain. I'm not sure, but I believe I want to and I get there. We moved forward from Missouri, crossing the vast ocean expanses of the Great Plains to the South Dakota Badland. There, near the depressed Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, we stopped at a diner. You should meet Ansel Woodenknife, the cook said when I ordered baby bread tacos. He's quite a guy. The next day, I called Woodenknife, who'd invented a baby bread taco dish, in his house in Interior. A wide-faced, firmly built man greeted me at the door. Busy with studying EMT he couldn't speak then, but fell for our campsite a couple of nights later. Woodenknife was also amazed at the size and diversity of the United States, and that it didn't somehow fall to pieces. It's because of change, he told me. This is the only country where everything changes all the time. People come here waiting for change, and if they're going to survive, if they're going to be successful, they've got to learn to adapt to the changes of different people from different races. Woodenknife's formal education ended in ninth grade, but he got a PhD in adaptation. Born in neighboring Rosebud, a disclaimer raised as one of 12 children in the cabin without electricity or running water, he was taken from his parents at the age of nine, against their wishes and placed in a white foster home in Philadelphia. It happened to thousands of Native American children, caught up in government programs that de-Indianize them. It didn't work in the Woodenknife case. He fled so often that he was branded nerigible and sent back to a reservation where he learned to cling more fiercely to his traditional culture, eventually becoming Lakota Sun-Dancer.He also became an entrepreneur, running a busy restaurant and marketing Indian baby bread tacos to supermarket chains around the country. In 2003 he was inducted into South Dakota's Small Business Hall of Fame. Citing himself as an example, Woodenknife didn't think the suction pot was a way of national unity. Rather, he said, every American should try to stay true to his or her ethnic heritage while preserving American identity. The national fabric would then be, he said, a duvet of paint, all sewn in the form of the United States. William Brinson on Reader's Digest/courtesy of Philip CaputoLeslie and I stayed at the interstate for the most part, sticking to old routes like Natchez Trace, blazing with early American colonists, and Lewis and Clark Trail, a network of major highways and back roads after the route by lewis and clark expedition in 1804 to the 1806.At Montana dude ranch, we rode alpine meadows with a new wrangler, Annaliese Apel. Barely five feet tall, Apel described himself as a onetime girl gangster who'd grown up on the east side of St. Paul. She turned to fighting horses to save herself from this life. Apel embraced the strife I feared was tearing off the folk seam. I think the country is definitely upset, she said. At the same time, in order to grow as a country, we need conflict, and the conflict is healthy. But the media has this awesome way of blowing it out proportionally. Lewis and Clark Trail finally brought us to the Pacific coast. We went north, crossed the Canadian border, and made our way up the steep Alaska Highway through British Columbia and the Yukon into north of Fairbanks, we took the northern road in the United States: the Dalton Highway, more than 400 miles from gravel and buckled asphalt. Road conditions make it a risky drive, and the scenery—endless stretching of mountains and tundra, trans-Alaska oil pipeline crossing and recrossing the landscape, can be hypnotic. But we only had one failure, a flat tire, before reaching our goal. Seventy-nine days after starting at Key West, we were standing on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. We dipped our torĭši-short because polar bears were visible nearby and I added an Arctic water bottle I already filled halfway through the water from the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. Five thousand miles and three weeks later, I dropped the Airstream off Breckenridge Texas. There I heard the most inviting answer to my Big Question. It was given by Airstream's owner, Erica Sherwood, a 37-year-old small business owner. As I sat telling the traveler's tales of Erica and her husband, Jef, she turned the tables, throwing the question back at me. Taking my cue from Annaliese Apel's remarks about conflict, I take a metaphor from astronomy: the star remains a star because of the dynamic disequilibrium between its gravity, which pulls it inwards, and the fusion that sends its question flying outward. If there is too much of one or the other, it either collapses on itself or blows apart. Almost from its birth, America has pulled in the direction of maximum individual freedom for Thomas Jefferson's idea that the government that governs the least regulated best, and in the opposite direction of Alexander Hamilton's belief in centralized power. It is an eternal but equal conflict between these extremes that creates binding force, I said. Too much jefferson could lead to anarchy, too much Hamilton to tyranny. Erica and Jef found it a little strange and abstract, so I asked Erica for thought about what unites Americans, and she nailed it. That's hope, she said. Isn't that what it's always been? Philip Caputo is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and author of 15 books. His latest is The Longest Road, from which this essay is adapted. Custom.

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