

5 The Road Less Traveled 8-10-06

I may be the only adult I know who has seen the new Pixar movie “Cars” twice in the theater. This double viewing gets filed for me under the heading of “Things I Do for my Grandchildren that I Would Not Normally Do.”

“Cars” is actually a good film with that critical combination of elements appealing both to children and grownups. (I wasn’t the only adult in the audience swooning to James Taylor’s “Our Town” in the soundtrack.)

This movie addresses the loss of industry to small towns bypassed by the superhighways. The old Route 66 figures prominently. A car in the fictitious burg of Radiator Springs bemoans the fact that people drive the interstate so that “they can *make* better time, but they sure don’t *have* a better time.”

This thought has stayed with me. I love the safety and speed of interstate travel, but I’m remembering vacations on smaller, less efficient roads which took us through real towns.

As a child, I was tickled to see a burro tied up outside a grocery store on a drive through Colorado. I was interested to learn about the tobacco drying sheds we saw as we drove down farm lanes in Virginia. And I remember my horror at seeing a “No Coloreds Allowed” sign on a diner in a small town in South Carolina.

Every interstate stop looks the same—a gas station and a fast food restaurant—from Santa Monica to Bangor. In exchange for convenience, interstate travel bleaches away much regional cultural experience from our trips.

A step off the beaten path allows us to experience our country’s vast diversity. Even with the proliferation of Walmart, MacDonalds and other retail giants, each community has its own flavor.

A different environment opens children’s eyes to the incredible array of human experiences. Their ears note differences in local language, and they sense a change in pace. In New York City they observe that people walk or ride subways or taxis. In Oklahoma, they see people park on the street downtown and say hello to everyone they pass.

Racing to Orlando on the interstate and then spending three days in an amusement park misses some terrific opportunities along the way. A richer experience might be to slow down, driving on the state and county roads. Get out of the car, eat lunch at a small café downtown, talk to the owners and have them tell you and your kids about their community.

Getting off the beaten path together enriches a family’s culture. You make memories that reflect your own family’s unique experience within the context of a greater humanity.

While you may not make better time, you might just have a better time.