

Sagalands

A viking, an emperor, two brothers, and a new chapter of life

a travelogue

by

Courtney White

© 2024 Courtney White

Contents

2023

Chapter One **Five Ports for Rollo**

Chapter Two **Alba**

2024

Chapter Three **The Streets of Pompeii**

Chapter Four **Francia**

2023

Five Ports for Rollo

Bells woke me up.

I could hear their deep, methodical ringing through my hotel room's closed and curtained windows. It's one of my favorite sounds in the world, so I rose quickly from the bed, fumbled the curtains aside, and pulled a window open. I caught the last three chimes. I closed my eyes as the reverberations faded away. Having staggered into the bed only three hours earlier after a disastrous day of travel, the sonorous bells revived my exhausted spirits. It was exactly what I needed. City



My room with a view

sounds filled my ears now, a steady murmur of traffic punctuated by the brakes of a bus or truck. I opened my eyes to a large square speckled with people in the early light. A stream of riders on bicycles flowed along the wide boulevard below my window. Copenhagen. I was in Europe! But just barely. A canceled first flight in Albuquerque, New Mexico, followed by a delayed connection in Dallas, followed by a mistimed connection by the airline resulting in a seven-hour layover in Heathrow airport, followed by an hour-long wait in the nearly empty Copenhagen airport to report lost luggage, followed by a lonely vigil for a train downtown conspired to push my arrival at the hotel bed to 3 am. The bells washed it all away.

I was here! I searched the stately buildings that surrounded the square for the source of the ringing but without success. I wanted to say *thank you* to someone for the bells. They felt like the proper way to start a two-week trip.

And a whole new chapter in my life.

I could see people entering a chain coffee store across the square, which meant it was open. That's all I needed to know. I threw my rumpled clothes back on, caught the elevator, and stepped outside. The soft air embraced me like an old friend. I crossed the street and entered the square, soaking up the Old World ambiance that surrounded me. The square seemed to bask in the peace and quiet of the early morning, as did I. It was mid-summer day, 2023, so I knew it was the start of a sixteen-hour run of daylight – just as I had planned. One of my goals when designing the trip was to use the long daylight to see as much as possible, though I didn't expect to be operating on so little sleep the first day, thus the beeline for caffeine and the chain store. I love European coffee and normally wouldn't go near the ubiquitous American brand, but at this hour I didn't appear to

have a choice. Moments later, cappuccino in hand, I drifted into an adjacent street to count my blessings. I was in Europe. I had coffee. More importantly, I was still in one piece emotionally. For a while over the winter, I had my doubts.

I strolled down the street, which doubled as a shopping mall and would soon be filled with people. I love European streets in the dawn hours. Everything feels fresh and renewed, ready for the day – feelings I craved now. It had been a miserable winter. The death of my wife, Gen, from cancer in early October had punched a gaping hole in my life. In July 2021, after fifteen years of treatments for a rare type of cancer called neuroendocrine tumors, she needed heart surgery to replace infected valves. The surgery and recovery went well but over the winter the tumors began to spread unexpectedly. Gen started on chemo pills in February, but the tumors kept spreading. In July, she stopped taking the drugs when it became clear they weren't being effective. Her doctor asked if she understood the meaning of her decision. She did. Me too. I cried in the car, but Gen remained stoic. In August, I began doing all the hospice for her at our home near Santa Fe as her health faded. On a beautiful, sunny September afternoon, we took a drive so she could see her beloved New Mexico once more. Two weeks later, I held her hand as she died.



Gen

I made it through Gen's memorial ([collected as an essay](#)) in November and the holidays in December with the help of our children, Sterling and Olivia, and many hugs and tears. It was so good to have them back in the house, however briefly. I got to be a parent again when Sterling caught the flu over the holidays. After their departure, however, a solitude settled into the house alongside grief. My only companion was our ten-year-old fluffy lap dog, Squidgy. I was grateful for her presence, but she couldn't dent the silence that filled most of my hours now. I saw friends, did things in town, and kept busy with writing and work, which filled the long days and nights and kept my mind focused on the present instead of the past. The snow kept coming, however, and winter dragged on. We usually burn a lot of wood in our iron stove to keep the house warm, but it became a four-cord winter, the most ever. I was happy to chop wood when it was four of us, then just the two of us. Now, it was a chore. And lighting a fire just for myself made me feel lonely. One night, I decided I needed a summer trip to revive my spirits.

I knew where to go.

After a necessary nap back at the hotel, I headed out into the streets of Copenhagen again. Randomly zig-zagging, I eventually found myself standing outside a royal palace. It didn't look particularly old, but it was pretty, so I pulled out my phone for a photo. Nearby, I spied a statue of



Royal dude, Copenhagen

a dude on horseback, looking regal and authoritarian. A king, I assumed, though I didn't know who. That was one reason why I was in Copenhagen at the start of a trip through Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Other than a brief trip to southern Norway in October 2017 to give a talk and hike to a rock overlooking a fjord, Scandinavia was *terra incognita*. I wanted to fill in the blanks. Olivia did a mid-summer visit to Copenhagen during her college-abroad semester in Berlin and reported it was lovely. After deciding to start in Copenhagen, my wheels began to turn. As the family knows, I love planning trips, where to stay, what to see. Very sadly, the planning wouldn't include Gen. That was hard to accept on many levels, but it was also another reason to go.

I needed to figure out what *solo* meant out in the world.

As I wandered, raucous gangs of high school graduates roved the busy streets in brightly-colored, balloon-festooned trucks. I assumed at first their boisterous (drunk) celebrations were a deliberate counterpoint to the staid citizens on the streets, but it also looked like nonstop partying. I missed Gen's perspective. She would have had something wry and smart to say about the noisy kids. We could have discussed it over lunch and a beer. I found a restaurant that fronted a busy street and picked a table outside for people-watching, hoping for a distraction from the empty seat across from me. It didn't work. There's something about eating alone that doesn't feel right. A meal is a highly social activity, as it has been for thousands of years. It's a chance to talk, laugh, gossip – all the intimate things humans do over food. Eating alone feels like breaking an ancient ritual. Add grief, and it makes a lonely meal. I comforted myself by watching the crowds and soaking up the conversational sounds of my fellow diners, though I couldn't understand a word. It was the same at Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen's famous amusement park, where I spent the evening. After checking out the sights, I stayed for a Gay Pride concert that featured a talented singer dressed in drag. It was great fun – but it was hard to watch alone.



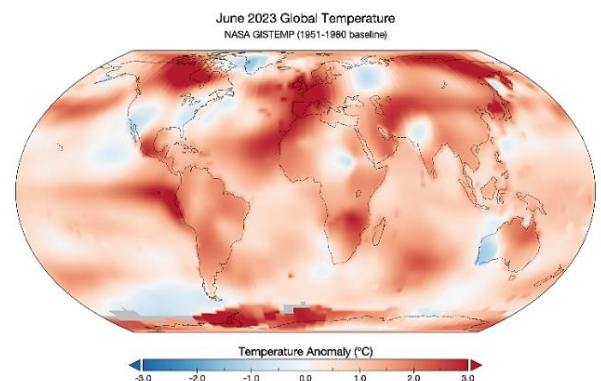
Gay Pride concert at Tivoli

Solo. It was hard to get my mind around the idea – and the fact. Gen and I were together for forty years. We met during Orientation week at the start of our freshman year at Reed College. We dated for the next four years, spending a lot of time in each other’s company on campus and



camping trips. In the spring of 1983, I joined Gen in a house of friends during her final semester at Reed. Our happy cohabitation was brief, alas. Gen went home to New Mexico every summer to work on archaeological projects. After graduation, she worked research jobs around the region for the rest of the year. During a stint in Reno, Nevada, she found a stray dog shivering in the cold. She named him Sutro. I remember her phone call – we had our first family member! In 1985, she enrolled in UCLA’s graduate program in archaeology, and the two of us moved into a tiny apartment on a dead-end street in West Hollywood. It was the formal start to thirty-seven years of living together, a span that included sixteen chickens, five dogs, four houses, and two children. We were rarely apart in all those years.

What to do with this new and unwanted chapter in my life? It was a question I kept asking myself during the depths of winter. In the wake of Gen’s death, I contemplated selling our house, which we had occupied for nearly twenty years, and moving away. But to where exactly? The prospect of being a stranger in a strange city at age sixty-two had limited appeal. I thought about moving near Sterling or Olivia, but I didn’t want to intrude on their busy lives. Besides, I love Santa Fe and I love New Mexico. Why would I leave? Still, it was hard. Memories of Gen and our lives together – we moved to Santa Fe from Los Angeles in 1991 – saturated every place I went. Memories fade, but it was small consolation. There was another factor to consider: climate change. Under rising temperatures and increasingly severe weather, where is the best place to live? I knew from my work that the list of places *not* to live was growing longer by the year: too hot, too humid, too prone to flooding, too close to the ocean, too vulnerable to big fires. Criminal inaction on global warming by government “leaders” and the raging disinterest of fellow citizens despite mountains of scientific data and repeated dire warnings means these conditions will get worse. On cue, June 2023 was the hottest June on record. Sterling



lives in Portland, Oregon, which recently endured record heat as well as choking smoke from wildfires. Olivia lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, which has been stuck in a drought and has tons of humidity. In the end, I decided to stay in my house.

Walking through Copenhagen, I was deeply impressed by the quantity of bicycles I saw. The city is famous for being bike-friendly, so I expected to see a lot of people on two wheels, but I wasn't prepared for the huge amount of bikes parked on sidewalks. I've lived in the American



A sidewalk of bikes

West for nearly my entire life, including Phoenix and Los Angeles where cars rule, so I was primed to be amazed by the bikes, but still – wow! Good for the Danes. My guidebook recommended that visitors take a spin around the city on a rental, and I was tempted briefly. I like bikes, but I'm a walker. It goes back to my youth when I did a ton of hiking and archaeological survey. There's just something about walking: the satisfying feeling of foot meeting the ground; the natural pace of a human stride; and the opportunity to think about things in your life, past and present, while your feet do the work. Also, walking grants you the freedom to go anywhere, anytime. On the downside, you don't get an adrenaline rush putting

one foot in front of another like you do zipping around on a bicycle. I like adrenaline, but I also like to look at things as I go. I suspected there was much to see underneath my feet as I walked through Scandinavia, so I began taking photographs of my shoes against interesting paving patterns, something that Gen liked to do during our travels in Europe. It appealed to both the archaeologist and the artist in her. Doing so on this trip felt like a nice way to honor her.



Pattern #1 (Copenhagen)

The next day, I focused my rambling on parts of the city along the water's edge, starting at the historic Kastellet, a pentagram-shaped fortress built in the 17th century to protect Copenhagen from attack by the neighborhood bully, Sweden. It was pretty, but rather dull. I kept walking. I had already decided to skip the royal palaces on my journey through the region. Unlike previous trips, I wasn't in the mood anymore for the gilded excesses of the elite class, even though their 'homes' were spectacular bits of historical architecture. The bad behavior of the ruling classes over the centuries, particularly those involved in vast wealth accumulation via colonial exploitation and the

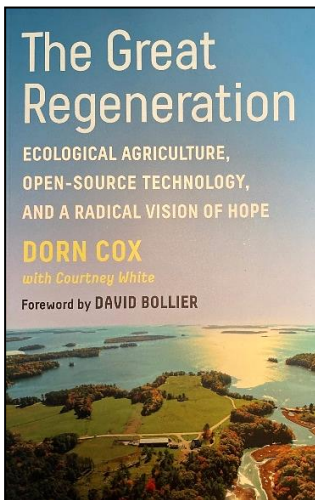
slave trade, had been much in the news. Official apologies were being issued by European governments and there was talk of reparations – long overdue. Going into a royal palace felt like a tacit acceptance of the injustice embedded in its stones and chandeliers. The world had changed. Me too. I preferred the sights and sounds of people outside enjoying a pretty day. I walked to the popular Nyhavn district for lunch. An old harbor, Nyhavn is filled with colorful buildings, busy restaurants, and tourists. I found a small table amidst a throng of fellow lunch-goers and settled in for another civilized meal. Eating outside in Europe ranks near the top of my favorite things to do. I missed Gen, though it was better this time, my soloness eased a bit by a chatty waitress.



A lovely day in Nyhavn

There was another reason to travel to Scandinavia. Gen’s death in 2022 followed hard on the heels of a decision I made to call it a career after forty years (see my essay [Under The Glacier](#)). I had been seeking creative answers to anguished questions about land and people since my teenage years (explained in [The Jaguar’s Teeth](#)). After college, I became involved in conservation work,

initially focused on protecting public lands. Frustrated with my fellow activists and their stuck-in-the-mud attitudes, in 1997 I cofounded the nonprofit Quivira Coalition with a progressive rancher. Our mission was to improve land health and build ecological and economic resilience by enlarging a *radical center* of ranchers, environmentalists, scientists, and others. We were pioneer advocates for what is today called [regenerative agriculture](#). Our work grew to include nature-based solutions to climate change. I began [writing books](#). In 2016, I left Quivira to write full-time, including coauthorship of four books, one each with a farmer, a rancher, a natural fiber expert, and a well-known author and climate activist. However, while traveling on a train from Berlin to Prague on July 25, 2019, Gen and I endured a record-smashing heat wave that drained my spirits



My final ‘career’ book

(see [The Heat Wave](#)). Add President Trump and the Covid-19 pandemic and by July 2022 I was exhausted. No more save-the-world books, I decided. I’m an author, however. After Gen’s death, I realized I needed new writing project – which is where Scandinavia came in.

I decided to chase a famous viking.

I'll explain. On my 60th birthday in 2020, I began researching my family tree. Actually, it was a family *branch*: my paternal grandmother Elizabeth Lacy. Years earlier, my aunt Sara Lacy gave me a sheath of documents that traced an unbroken line of male Lacys from Elizabeth's dad back to brothers Walter and Ilbert de Lacy who fought at the Battle of Hastings alongside William the Conqueror. I was dubious at first, but a detailed genealogy of the Lacys published by a distant relative appeared to confirm the link. Then I got on the Internet. Wow. I felt like I had been hit by a firehose of genealogical information. What I uncovered not only corroborated the link to Walter and Ilbert de Lacy but traced them back to their hometown of Lassy, in central Normandy, France, not far from William the Conqueror's hometown of Falaise. It wasn't hard to imagine their families interacting. I kept digging. Soon, I discovered I was a direct descendent of the Conqueror himself, as are many millions of people around the world.

I knew my branch of the Lacys were deep Southerners, starting in south Arkansas, then over to the hill country of South Carolina, then back to colonial Virginia, close to Jamestown. While rooting on the Internet, I came across a PDF of President George W. Bush's lineage that traced a branch of his family to William the Conqueror. A third of the way, President Bush and I shared a common ancestor: Mary Aston, born in 1629 in Charles County, Virginia. Her father was Lieutenant Colonel Walter Aston, who emigrated from Staffordshire, England, in 1627 aboard the ship *James*, "bringing with him foodstuffs and tobacco pipes." The Astons were part of the English aristocracy, which is how President Bush and I make our way back to William the Conqueror. Two of William's children produced thirty-six grandchildren, including our ancestor King Henry I, who was responsible for twenty-five himself! Marriage among the aristocracy was tightly controlled and carefully documented. From William the Conqueror, a well-documented genealogical path to his great-great-great grandfather: an enterprising viking leader named Rollo.

My 35th great-grandfather.

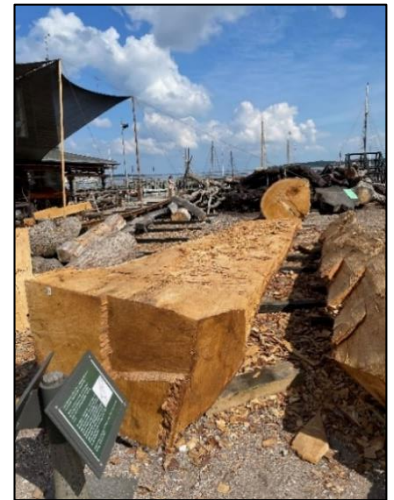
The next morning, I boarded a train for the city of Roskilde, a short ride from Copenhagen. Young people flowed into the compartment with me, wearing backpacks, ear buds, and smiles. Where were they all going? I did a quick search. Ah. An annual rock music festival in Roskilde. That sounded like fun. Reaching our destination, the young folk went left while I turned right, starting a leisurely walk to the famous Viking Ship Museum. It features five ships deliberately sunk around 1070 AD to block part of the fjord that led from the ocean to Roskilde, a hub of trade routes at the time. The city was founded in 980 AD by Harald Bluetooth, King of Denmark, but it



Roskilde Cathedral

was likely a busy port long before Harald made his kingly appearance. It served as the capital of Denmark from 1050 or so to 1443 when royal favor shifted to Copenhagen though Roskilde Cathedral continues to be the burial ground for nation's royalty. I went to Roskilde to see the viking ships, as well as the harbor where Rollo might have set sail more than a thousand years ago. Might have. No one knows for sure. In the late 8th century, vikings began sailing from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway in search of plunder, commencing a campaign of violence and death across Europe that became fodder centuries later for countless television shows. One of the vikings was Rollo, who arrived in what is today Normandy around 900 AD and changed the course of history. Rollo's origin is a source of much speculation. Was he Danish? He did leave from Roskilde? Or another port in Scandinavia? I wanted to search and learn, so I built my trip around visiting five possible ports.

As soon as I entered the museum grounds I missed Gen. In addition to the five viking boats neatly displayed in a large building, the museum is a living laboratory for ship-making viking-style, which she would have loved to witness. It's a discipline called *experimental archaeology*, where modern experts try to revive long-lost techniques by reproducing an ancient object such as a pot, sword, or ship using science and their own hands with the goal of getting as close to the original as possible. It's a way of achieving a deeper understanding of the many physical processes involved, but it also allows the experts to get inside the heads of the long-



The start of a viking longboat

gone people by solving problems they had to solve, such as creating a viking longboat from scratch. Over the years, museum staff and volunteers successfully constructed life-size replicas of the viking boats that were sunk in the fjord and sailed them around the harbor. They even sailed one from Roskilde all the way to Dublin, Ireland, the longboat's original home. That must have been a thrill! Wandering the grounds, I marveled at the skill of the viking shipwrights and their modern-day counterparts. Then I took a ride on a boat myself. Joining twenty other visitors, we took a



Viking ship-building expert

spin in one of the reconstructed viking boats. It was great fun. Under the supervision of museum staff, we rowed cheerfully if clumsily into the harbor. After stashing the oars, we helped set the canvas sail. As we cruised along, I tried to imagine what a long ocean voyage would have been like. Dangerous and tedious. Cramped and exhausting. Despite the sail, vikings spent much of their time rowing. The perilous crossing to England would have taken roughly three weeks depending on the weather, demonstrating that the vikings were peerless sailors as well.



Sailing in a viking boat

Back on land, I headed for the museum café. I needed coffee and a sandwich. I settled at a table in the mostly empty patio, under blazing blue skies. Moments later tears came. I missed Gen. This is exactly the sort of adventure we did together for so many years – go to new places, share experiences, walk, talk, laugh. We were many things in our long relationship, including great travel buddies. Gen was cheerfully game for anything I cooked up for us, long days, long drives, one more church or castle. Once, she negotiated us out of a disaster at a tollbooth in rural France by using her rusty college French to ask impatient drivers



Gen in Tuscany

behind us to back up. There were many more wonderful travel stories. She wasn't here to share the boat ride with me like days past, but I couldn't text her either or send photographs. That's what triggered the tears. She wasn't here, and she wasn't there. One of the hardest things to accept about death is knowing that you will never see that person again, ever. My brain couldn't process that fact in the months following her death, not after forty years together. She wasn't at work, in town, at home, or on a trip. She wasn't going to walk in the door or answer her phone or respond to an email or text. My tears stopped after a while. Solo is hard. There aren't any manuals. You make things up as you go along. How to occupy an empty house. How to eat meals alone. The loss of daily conversations. Shopping for one. Struggling with the flu on my own. Traveling solo. Sitting in the café, I realized it wasn't simply a matter of coping or adjusting to my new reality. I needed to find a new way of being. One port at a time.



My next stop was Stockholm. I arrived by train late in the afternoon on another beautiful day. Preferring to walk as usual, I clacked my luggage down the busy streets to the hotel, located near Nybroviken, a small bay close to the city center. Stockholm occupies a complex archipelago of islands, waterways, bays, and mainland. It is strategically located at the point where freshwater Lake Mälaren to the west meets the salt water of the Baltic Sea. Nestled deep in the splintered east coast of Sweden, the city was easy to defend historically. I liked Stockholm immediately. There were tons of trees, islands, and colorful buildings. After throwing my things into the hotel room, I headed down to the port and walked the length of the long promenade, soaking everything up. The silky harbor was filled with boats of all types: water buses and taxis, sightseeing ships, dinner cruises, floating restaurants, yachts, and patrol boats. There was a solitary fishing vessel. Walking back on the promenade and looking for a place to eat, I kept pinching myself – I was in Stockholm! I chose a restaurant close to the water’s edge mostly because of the sign above the entrance that read: “We Do Not Have WiFi. Talk to Each Other!” Ah, Europe.

I walked 35,000 steps the next day – and developed a heat rash above both ankles to prove it. I couldn’t help myself. Once I started wandering, I couldn’t stop. After breakfast I headed toward the old quarter, navigating the rush-hour traffic, which being Scandinavia, included waves of bicyclists. I took a brief break on the pedestal of a statue honoring King Gustav III, another royal, white, slave trading-supporting imperialist. Gustav’s distinction comes from being shot at midnight on March 16, 1792, while attending a masked ball at the Opera House. The murderers were aristocrats unhappy with the king for curtailing some of their elite privileges. Resuming my walk, I reached my destination: Gamla Stan, Stockholm’s stylish medieval quarter. It’s stylish because like every medieval center I’ve visited in Europe it has become a trendy outdoor shopping mall. When Gen and I visited Venice, Italy, in 2008 – my first trip to Europe since a high school visit to the United Kingdom in 1976 – I was shocked at first by the commercialism. Tourist shops lined every street. How many handbags and scarves did people need? Fortunately, the shock wore off under the relentless charm of Venice. Gen and I wandered everywhere over three memorable days. I fell in love with the city, and Europe by extension, particularly its medieval quarters. It’s a love affair that continues.



Selfie with king



Gamla Stan

Located on a small island, Gamla Stan is compact. It didn't take long to wander all the streets and lanes, even with generous breaks for coffee and ice cream. It was also very charming, aided by the lack of crowds at that early hour. When I emerged from the last street, I decided to do it all over again. This time, I ducked into a few shops, even though there was no one at home to buy gifts for anymore. It was an odd feeling. After years of present-buying for Gen and the kids, anticipating their delight, I spent my time now admiring craftsmanship. For a while, the family took up knitting and I made a point of bringing back exotic yarn from sheep ranches or farm stores during my travels

for the Quivira Coalition. Now, I just look. I don't need more stuff. I am content to take photos home. Finishing my second ramble, I settled in for a round of people-watching from a perch on a cement block in the old square. A short distance away was the Nobel Prize Museum, looking incongruous. The day grew warm, and the square soon filled with people. Tour groups appeared magically. One guide holding a yellow flag halted his group nearby and told the story of the Stockholm Bloodbath. The year was 1520. The reigning royal imperialist authoritarian was King Christian II, a Dane who had invaded Sweden and besieged Stockholm. As punishment for their resistance, dozens of the city's leading aristocrats, merchants, and clergy were shepherded into the square and beheaded. Rivers of blood ran down the streets, the tour guide said cheerfully. He waved his yellow flag and the group moved on.

I moved on too. After a ramble around a clutch of royal buildings, stopping only for photos of my feet, I explored the islands of Skepps and Kastell, once the leisuring grounds of Swedish royals, noble elites, Navy officers, and now tourists. I walked to Kastell's farthest point and sat on a bench where I munched on rolls I had kept from the breakfast buffet at the hotel. Across the water was the *Vasa*, a warship ordered into existence in 1626 by King Gustavus Adolphus to serve his imperialist ambitions in the Baltics. King Gustavus demanded that extra cannons be placed on the ship. They were crowded onto the upper decks making it unstable. On its maiden voyage, the *Vasa* sailed just 1,400 yards before capsizing. Today, the salvaged ship is a huge draw for tourists, though not for me. Too much authoritarian war-mongering for my tastes. I kept walking.



Pattern #2 (Stockholm)

I aimed for Skansen, an open-air folk museum featuring pre-industrial buildings collected around Sweden in the late 19th century. To reach the entrance I passed the popular ABBA museum, dedicated to the ubiquitous pop musical icons of the late 1970s. I remember ABBA from my high school days. I sped up. I was feeling better. The walking, the fresh air, and the attractiveness of



Pattern #3 (Stockholm)

the city were working in a healing way. I'm energetic and self-propelled and have been that way since I can remember, so staying busy has not been hard since Gen's death. I had some experience with soloness in my life as well. My adolescence was dominated by my mother, Joyce, who was unhappy and unpredictable, abetted by a sleeping pill addiction. After a series of embarrassing incidents, my father decided it would be best if no one came to our house. Period. No sleepovers. No colleagues for supper. No holiday visits from family. I was very social at school, but at home I had to entertain myself, spending long hours playing board games alone and making up fun things to do with chums who weren't

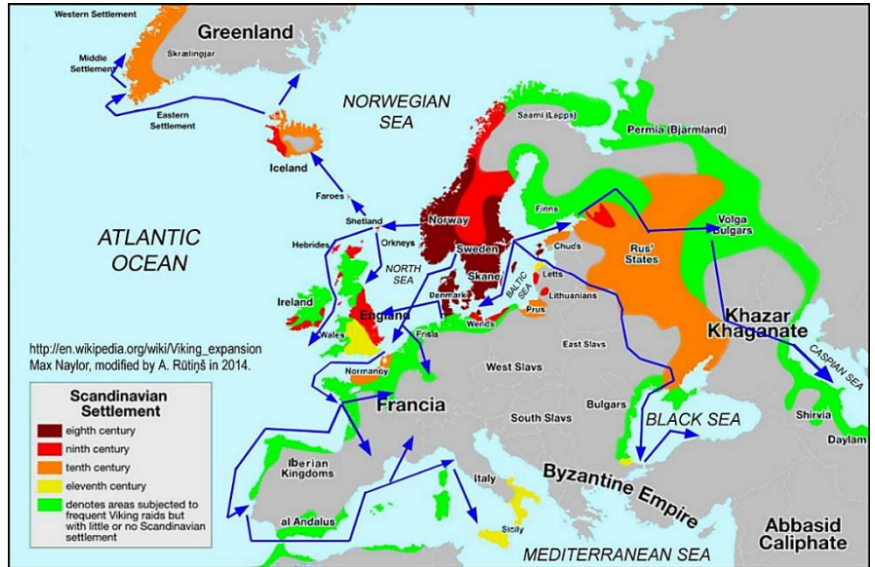
there. It stimulated my imagination and helped with loneliness, but it also sucked. That's a big reason I bonded with Gen so well – she was such good company! Now, I had to be my own company again, exercising memory muscles along with my legs.

It was time to get serious about vikings, so I started the next day with a visit to the National History Museum, curious about the Swedish take on the viking story. In popular culture, vikings are depicted as ferocious warriors bent on plunder and glory. The TV shows are not wrong. Plunder was a main reason vikings hazarded perilous ocean crossings in their sturdy but exposed boats beginning in 793 AD with a famous raid on Lindisfarne monastery in England. Their initial targets were religious houses in England, Scotland, and Ireland, which were full of coins and silver objects donated to them by wealthy benefactors. As news spread about the easy booty, the number of vikings boats hitting the seas rose quickly. Alas, the plunder included human slaves. Lots and lots of slaves. Ignored in the TV dramatizations, the acquisition of human chattel was a primary objective of viking raids and military campaigns. None of this was a fluke. Raiding, plunder-seeking, and the kidnapping, sale, and exploitation of human slaves were pillars of the viking economy and culture and had been for a long time.



Lindisfarne raid

There was another reason vikings hit the waves that is often overlooked by popular culture: in some places they came to stay. Eastern Europe, for example. The ‘Rus’ in ‘Russia’ is likely derived from an archaic Finnish word for ‘Sweden.’ Beginning in the 9th century, Swedish vikings called Vangarians began settling along the river routes to the Black and Caspian Seas. The Vangarians eventually



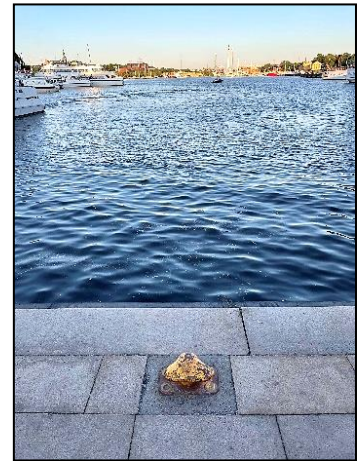
Where the vikings came from and where they went: note Normandy

formed the state of Kievan Rus which they ruled for a century before being absorbed into local Slavic society. In one of the earliest travelogues ever written, Ahmad ibn Fadlan, a 10th-century Arab ambassador and traveler, described the Rus this way: “They are as tall as a date palm, blond and ruddy so that they do not need to wear a tunic nor a cloak; rather the men among them wear garments that only cover half of his body and leaves one of his hands free.” He was not as admiring, however, of their hygiene which he called shameless and disgusting. Vikings made their way to Constantinople, where Byzantine Emperors assembled them into the Vangarian Guard, an elite unit dedicated to the Emperor’s protection. So many men began leaving Sweden to join the Guard that a law was passed to curb their emigration!

The museum exhibit noted that the vikings didn’t call themselves ‘vikings.’ The word’s origin is unclear. As a verb in Old Norse, it meant something like “to raid.” As a noun, it meant “pirate.” As a description of a people, the word ‘viking’ became popular in the 13th century, largely from the famous Icelandic sagas, which featured daring viking voyages and bloody family feuds. Contemporaries called them *norsemens* or more often *danens* (i.e., pagans). Vikings began settling England in 850 AD when they founded Jarvik – today known as York. Britons and others violently resisted their attempts at colonization. Nevertheless, viking colonies took root in parts of Iceland, Greenland, Russia, England, and France. One of the most consequential was Normandy – the land of the Northmen. Normans would have an outsized impact on French, English, and Italian history for centuries, from William the Conqueror (progenitor of the British royal family) to kings of

Jerusalem. Normandy was unusual in that it came into existence by treaty, not conquest. In 911 AD, the King of France, Charles the Simple, exhausted by constant plundering and sacking by vikings decided to try a different strategy. Instead of paying off his tormentors with gold to go away as usual, he agreed to a deal with a clever viking leader who wanted land instead. His name was Rollo. In exchange, Rollo promised the king to protect the realm from further viking depredations. It was a colossal mistake by Charles. Defying the odds, the viking colony prospered and expanded. France would not regain Normandy for three hundred years.

After the museum, I wandered through Stockholm pondering what I had learned. It is still a bit of a mystery to scholars why vikings did what they did. Plunder, slaves, gold, fame-seeking, and land acquisition were all good reasons to climb into a longboat with a sword and shield and hit the waves. Other theories include economic distress at home, not enough eligible women, and the rise of a new type of government: monarchy. Kings needed booty to fill royal coffers. Whatever their reasons, I'm glad they went – otherwise I wouldn't be here! I walked to the water's edge near my hotel. Did Rollo leave from Stockholm? Was he a Swede? Not likely. Swedish vikings went east to do their thing, not west. Good to know.



Nybroviken harbor

I decided to take a boat ride, this time without a sail. It was a lovely evening for a trip, so I hopped on a boat headed to Vaxholm Island, a popular destination an hour east of Stockholm. I found a quiet place to sit and put my feet up for a change. I watched the world drift by serenely, feeling well. I had been good company for myself today though I missed talking to someone.



Watching the world

That's one of the hardest things about traveling solo, there's no one to review the day's adventures with over a beer. Or a boat ride. Of course, I could post to social media – except I don't do social media. I tried a few platforms early on, but they didn't click. Besides, I hated the idea of wasting my time in the bottomless pit of the Internet (thankfully, in retrospect). As a result, though, I don't have an 'audience' for photos or travel updates, adding to my soloness. It's alright. I'll take the peace-and-quiet.



The next port was Oslo. After an uneventful ride train, I arrived in the Norwegian capital to be confronted with a novel experience: an automated hotel. Walking in the front door, I was greeted by three airport-style electronic kiosks. After a hesitation, I slowly punched my name and confirmation number into one. My reward was a plastic card, which I waved at a sensor near two imposing glass doors. Nothing happened. I tried it again. After a moment, the doors reluctantly opened, acting like the hotel was unenthused about my presence. Perhaps it detected my digital clumsiness and decided I was a generational relic, unworthy of its smart technology. Inside, I saw a solitary employee, a young man sitting on a stool studying his phone with a bored expression. The hotel décor felt like post-pandemic utilitarian. Not sure which way to go at first, I eventually found Building C and took an elevator to my generic, box-like room furnished, I noticed, with the minimum items necessary to get through the night. The window opened to a concrete well pocked with rows of rooms that looked exactly like mine. I couldn't see the sky. I felt like I had moved into a beehive. It was so unlike Europe that I didn't know what to think. At least it was relatively cheap and had a laundromat. And I wouldn't be staying long.

I had deduced from my pre-trip research that Oslo was not as charming as Copenhagen or Stockholm and planned accordingly. I was right. Other than a general Euro-ness, Oslo seemed like any other big city that I had visited, especially the large amount of construction taking place downtown. The weather was glorious, though, and it was still Europe, so I headed out, walking in loops until it was time for supper. It felt like there were fewer tourists and more locals here, but it was hard to be certain because nearly everyone looked the same. Over 80% of the population of Sweden and Norway identify as white. It's 86% in Denmark. I was ready for Scandinavia's homogeneity having been prepped by good friends, one of whom is Danish, but



Busy Oslo

after a week of traveling, it still felt rather jarring. My friends also said that for all of Europe's liberalness and sophistication, an undercurrent of racism runs strong. I knew that immigration issues had recently become volatile on the continent. It's likely to get worse, alas. As the effects of climate change deepen around the world, migration will become a big source of conflict as people seek relief and a better life. It has already started. I didn't want to think about it. I wanted food – so I picked a restaurant named for my daughter, Olivia!



I continued my walk around Oslo the next day, though I spent a bunch of time on my phone. I had declared a news blackout when I left home to lift my mood by dodging the daily assault of grim headlines, sequestering my phone in a pocket where it belonged. Today, however, the U.S. Supreme Court was due to deliver its verdict on President Biden's ambitious plan to reduce student loan debt by \$400 billion. Gen and I had taken out loans for Sterling and Olivia's expensive college educations. So had they. Both had also received Pell Grants, which meant Biden's debt relief plan would be quite helpful to them. The staggering cost of a college education in America is shameful. In much of Europe, including Scandinavia, tuition is *free*. How sensible is that? Olivia got a sense of the possibilities when she enrolled in university classes during her semester in Berlin. Both kids made choices to attend elite American schools but the financial penalty for non-rich kids is harsh. The conservative Supreme Court was unlikely to approve Biden's plan, but I checked my phone anyway as I walked. I was sitting on a bench munching on cashews when the news finally arrived: 6-3 against. No debt relief. I put my phone back into a pocket and decided it was time to think about vikings again.



Pattern #4 (Oslo)



Opera on the Oslofjord

I headed to Oslo's famous opera house, perched on the edge of the *Oslofjord*, a long finger of water pointed at Denmark. Historically, this part of Scandinavia was called *Viken*, which might derive from the Old Norse word *vik*, meaning an inlet. A person hailing from Viken could be called a *viking*. Or it could mean 'someone hiding in an inlet waiting to prey on boats passing by.' Did Rollo leave from Oslo? Possibly. According to the old Norse sagas, Oslo was founded in 1049 AD by Harald Hardrada, King of Norway from 1046 to 1066 (his reign ended abruptly when he died in battle trying to claim the English throne). That's too late for Rollo, who died around 932. Oslo grew out of an older viking settlement, so it's possible Rollo and his buddies climbed into a longboat here. Maybe he was eager to leave his backwater home and try his fortune in a distant land.

It's hard to say anything about Rollo with certainty because we know so few historical facts about the viking. We don't even know his real name. Rollo is a Latin name assigned to him by

Dudo of St. Quentin, a propagandist hired by Rollo's grandson Duke Richard I to write an official history of Normandy's founding. Rollo's original name might have been *Hrólfr*. Or it could be *Hrollaugr*. He might be the *Hrólfr the Walker* mentioned in two 13th-century Norse sagas, so named because the viking was too big for any horse to carry him. The sagas claim that *Hrólfr* was born in Møre, a coastal region of Norway, to a jarl (chieftain) named Rognvald Eysteinnsson. They say he antagonized Harald Fairhair, King of Norway, and had to flee. However, Dudo of St. Quentin wrote that Rollo was Danish and had to flee Denmark after a violent confrontation with its king. In the 19th century, the dispute became testy as Norwegian and Danish historians vied to claim the viking leader as one of their own. Dudo does tell a great story about Rollo (true or not): as a condition of the treaty, King Charles the Simple required Rollo to kiss his royal foot in submission. Proud viking that he was, Rollo refused. When Charles insisted, Rollo commanded another viking to take his place. Lifting the foot, this viking caused the king to topple backward, causing laughter and breaking the tension!



Rollo's tomb in Rouen Cathedral



The next day, I hit the road. The two remaining ports were located on the western coast of Norway, requiring a car and a driving adventure. I was ready. What I wasn't prepared for was the upgraded SUV the rental agency gave me. I drive a 2004 Subaru Outback that Gen and I purchased in 2016. It's a pleasant little car that gets me to where I need to go without any fuss. The SUV practically drove itself. Its complex digital dashboard display made me feel like I was in the cockpit of an F-16 jet. The vehicle constantly barraged me with warnings and instructions: I was driving too fast or too close to the edge of the road. It didn't like it when I strayed across the center stripe or came too close to an object as I backed up. An hour into the drive, a sensor began buzzing at me without pause. I had no idea what was wrong! I pulled over and made an inspection, without luck. Noticing that my pack in the back seat had tipped over, I uprighted it. The buzzing stopped. That's too many sensors. At one point, the SUV warned me it was 'time for a rest.' What a nanny! It did have one great fighter jet feature. The first time I punched the accelerator to pass a vehicle, the SUV leaped forward so powerfully that I nearly veered off the road. I loved it.

After navigating Oslo’s suburbs, I settled in for the eight-hour drive to Haugesund, a small city on the edge of the sea. It felt good to be driving long distances again. I came of age with the Interstate highway system in America, which made me feel like I had been born with a steering wheel in my hands. Out West, you didn’t think twice about a long drive. Gen felt the same way. We loved road trips, starting in 1980 with a memorable drive from her home in Albuquerque to Portland to start our Junior year at Reed. We camped in national forests and parks, including Yellowstone, and spent a chilly night in my truck somewhere north of Grand Junction, Colorado. The trip told us that travel would be one of our delights together. All true as it turned out, especially the many trips we took as a family with Sterling and Oliva, starting with a mini-van adventure to ranches when they were only three.

There was one journey that Gen would have happily skipped – becoming a cancer patient. She had a type of cancer without a cure, as we learned in 2006 during our first visit to Dr. Wollin at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in LA. There’s an old saying that the first day you get news like that is the first day you begin to grieve. Gen refused to grieve. She insisted we turn the whole cancer thing into an adventure. And we did. Train trips to LA with the kids. Disneyland. The beach. Museums. Hotels. Restaurants. Through the many checkups and treatments, Gen remained resilient. In 2014, she enrolled in a major clinical trial involving an experimental drug that had to be flown in from Italy. The medicine was radioactive, requiring everyone to stand in the hall, doctors included, as it was injected into her arm. Its purpose was to retard the cancer’s growth. She endured three rounds of treatments over five years. The trial was successful, and the FDA approved the drug,



Gen after a doctor visit in 2008



Gen in Twelfth Night

which made her happy. Over time, however, her spirits began to sink as the cancer journey became less and less of an adventure, especially after Sterling and Olivia left for college in 2017. For fun, she turned to Shakespeare, joining an amateur acting ensemble, and organizing a reading group. A month before her heart surgery in 2021, she performed in *Twelfth Night*. She kept on. In late May 2022, she played the Ghost in *Hamlet*, among other roles. Although it taxed her waning health, she was determined to see the performances through. She died four months later.

I drove through the stark Norwegian outback thinking about journeys. My forty years in conservation happened in tandem with my forty-year relationship with Gen. The two journeys were one for me. My decision to call it a career followed by Gen's death meant I found myself without a journey. I felt like the skipper of a boat who suddenly learn how to sail solo but wasn't sure where to sail to. That I needed to go *somewhere* was never in doubt. It's who I am. The vikings knew where they were going and why. I'm no viking, thankfully, but I was struck on this trip by the power of purpose. It recalled ranchers that I worked with during my years with Quivira. The most successful ranch families had clearly defined goals for themselves and their business. It's the same for nonprofit organizations. Maybe individuals as well. Researchers have linked happiness and well-being to a person's sense of purpose, big or small. For me, that means a journey. Travel itself isn't a purpose. It's a means. But a means to where or what?

Halfway to Haugesund, my thoughts were interrupted by water. Lakes appeared first, followed by snow. Then creeks and waterfalls. Finally, fjords. I needed fjords. The day was cloudy and gray, which matched my mood. The stark landscape was attractive, but it also felt deserted. One of the things I love most about driving around Europe is the random appearance of a watchtower or old home or the odd castle. You never knew what historic building or farm lay around the next bend. Old



stuff tickles both the archaeologist and the writer in me. What's the story behind that ruined keep? Who lived in that chateaux? How do I get to the spooky castle on the hill? Sometimes, the questions



had unexpected answers. While exploring Tuscany by car, Gen and I decided to visit a villa listed in our guidebook. However, we were met at the villa's entrance by armed guards who told us to turn around, pronto. Driving in Norway was totally different. No spooky castles. I did find a derelict highway bridge spanning a noisy creek, but it dated only to the 1920s. I took a photo anyway. What Norway has in abundance is natural beauty. Every turn of the road seemed to reveal a stunning view. Norway also has fjords. I love fjords. Their majestic serenity can calm jangled nerves, including those weary from a long day of driving solo. I needed their serenity and embraced their solace on a gray day.

The gods smiled on me the next morning. Forecasted rain gave way to glorious sunshine on the drive to Avaldsnes, site of the medieval royal residence of Norway’s first kings. Avaldsnes sits on a hill overlooking a strategic chokepoint on a strait of water connecting a bay to the south with the coast to the north, a route called *Norðvegr* – the North Way – which gave Norway its name. I parked in a gravel lot near Saint Olaf’s church, a handsome stone structure built in 1250 AD by King Håkon IV, who lived in the adjacent royal palace. Not being a church-goer, I wondered why there were so many cars in the parking lot until I saw a well-dressed older couple enter the church. It was Sunday morning, duh!



Excavation at the royal palace of Avaldsnes

The museum wasn’t open yet, so I wandered around, soaking up the benevolence of whichever deity was in charge that morning. The view was bucolic. There were sheep, wildflowers, grass, trees, blue skies, clouds, inlets, and islands, all very tidy and pretty. It was hard to imagine this was the center of Norwegian royal power for centuries. Missing was the palace itself, which deteriorated after the royal seat shifted to Trondheim in 1400. A recent archaeological excavation revealed the residence to be modest in size. Nearby are large burial mounds, some dating back to the Bronze Age. One mound contained a cache of Roman-era weapons, musical instruments, and a necklace of gold.

The museum highlighted the literary side of the Avaldsnes story, a side that unexpectedly resonated with my journey – the sagas. Norse sagas are prose narratives written down from the 12th through the 14th centuries, mostly in Iceland. *Saga* is an Old Norse word meaning “tale.” Sagas had roots in a tradition of oral storytelling in Scandinavia. They were memorized by individuals



Page from an Icelandic saga

to be recited at home, at public gatherings, or at court for jarls and kings. There are five types: *mythical-heroic sagas* recount the deeds of legendary ancestors; *chivalric sagas* feature knights and their daring adventures and many loves; *kings’ sagas* chronicle the lives of Scandinavian kings both real and imagined; *contemporary sagas* focus on everyday life; and *family sagas* feature viking voyages, settlement in

Iceland, genealogies, and tales of violent feuds between family members. Some of the genealogies are so accurate they allow modern-day Icelanders to trace their families back a thousand years to a viking ancestor. That sounded familiar!

Although each type of saga had a different purpose, they shared some common elements: the authors were mostly anonymous; they were written in Old Norse (not Latin); they employed poetry along with prose; they were told from a Christian perspective while admiring the pagan past; and many sagas focused on regular people and their lives, which makes them quite readable. All of them mixed history with fiction so thoroughly that modern scholars find it almost impossible to untangle what is fact and what is not. Take Avaldsnes, for example. According to one saga, the great god Odin himself visited Avaldsnes in 998 AD disguised as a one-eyed old man. He came to tell the current king a tall tale about the legendary King Augvald, founder of Avaldsnes, who ruled many centuries earlier. Augvald united the country by conquest, Odin said admiringly.

It was all explained in the museum. The sagas say the palace at Avaldsnes was the royal residence of King Harald Fairhair, who unified Norway in 872 AD following a glorious naval victory over rivals. They also say it was here that my ancestor Rollo/Hrólf the Walker antagonized Harald, earning banishment. The trouble is King Harald may not have existed! No reliable contemporary source mentions him, and archaeologists can't identify him. He exists chiefly in sagas written three centuries later, becoming a kind of 'King Arthur' of Norway. Did King Arthur of England actually exist? Does it matter? Not really. It demonstrates the power of storytelling. That's what resonated with me in the museum, our need for stories. It wasn't a revelation. I've been telling stories all my life – but it did give me an idea. I'd write a family saga of my own.

Leaving the museum, I headed down a trail to an intriguing cove nestled in the shoreline a stone's throw from the old palace. I could see that it had potential to be a launching spot for viking



The little cove

longboats. I had no idea if the shoreline had changed much in a thousand years. It certainly felt timeless, though the hulking presence of two derelict oil tankers in the water nearby muted the effect. Had there been a port here once? I thought about going back to the museum to ask. I decided to sit on a rock instead. The cove was shallow, which suggested that wooden piers and other structures would have been needed to make a port functional. Of course,

Avaldsnes' harbor could have been located somewhere else. Maybe the vikings beached their boats here on the shore after a successful plundering raid overseas, eager to run up the hill to the palace and tell their king the good news. Either way, the little cove had a strong viking vibe.

For the first time all trip, I felt close to my roots. Whether Rollo left from this spot to start his historic journey – or whether he was even Norwegian – wasn't as important as the vibe I felt. He was part of a culture that stretched back thousands of years, deep into the foggy mists of both archaeology and storytelling. Sitting on my rock, I imagined a vast historical watershed across Scandinavia with individuals and families acting as creeks and streams flowing and merging over time into a river. The misty headwaters of a family's watershed are often obscure, but there comes a point when a stream comes into focus. For me, that's Rollo, and the place was here, at Avaldsnes. It's not a perfect analogy, but one that I prefer over the conventional family 'tree' with its bewildering amount of branches. In ecology, a watershed is dominated by a main channel or river, the remainder are tributaries and creeks. It can be the same in genealogy. Pick a main family river to follow back to its headwaters. The other streams and creeks in your watershed are genealogical tributaries.

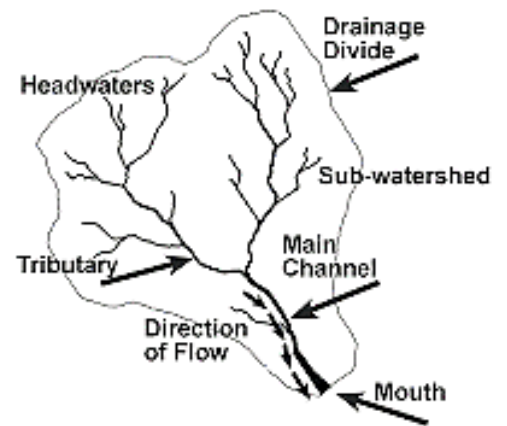


Diagram of a watershed

In my case, the river has a name: *de Lacy*. It is named for my grandmother, Elizabeth Lacy. I can follow the river back nine hundred years to its headwaters in Normandy. Rollo is the river's biggest tributary. I will call it *Rollo Creek*. It rises in Scandinavia, flows through Normandy to England. I knew there were other important tributaries, each packed with saga-worthy stories. There were kings, earls, knights, crusaders, rebellious lords, defiant wives, murderous feuds, mysterious deaths, treachery, adultery, and loads of historic battles. I'm related to sixteen of the twenty-five barons that forced stinky King John to sign the Magna Carta, including John de Lacy (family ties were critical to the rebellion). King John starved two of my ancestors to death. Two others, a mother and daughter, were the first women to be imprisoned in the Tower of London. In America, I have ancestors who survived the Starving Time at Jamestown, greeted the first ship to bring African slaves to our shores, and fought in two battles that turned the tide of the American Revolution in the South. Another nearly died at the Battle of Murfreesboro during the Civil War,

shamefully defending the desire of Southerners to continue buying and selling human beings. The list goes on. As a family saga, it had all the right stuff.

The De Lacy saga.



There was one more port to visit. I climbed back into the SUV and pointed it north. I had reached a truce with the vehicle's nannyiness, allowing me to enjoy the scenery. And what scenery! It felt like I was driving through Valhalla. I drove up the E39, a major highway that hugs Norway's fractured west coast, winding across islands, around inlets, and over huge fjords. Reaching the port



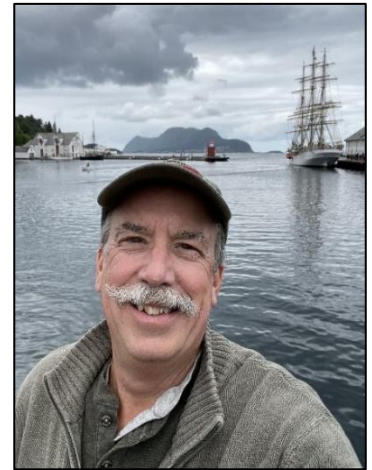
Driving through Valhalla

required four ferries, and two overnight stays. I decided to skip Bergen, a popular tourist destination. The weather had turned drizzly, and I didn't feel like dealing with scarce parking or gangs of people in the rain. I wanted to keep going. I fretted about making a rookie mistake on the ferries, but all went well. Traffic was light, and the E39 smooth. I sailed along, making only two wrong turns that required a GPS consultation with my phone, which I thought was rather good for an old guy!

In mid-afternoon of the third day, I reached my destination – Ålesund, a tiny, colorful port town located in the region of Møre. It sat on a narrow, curved finger of land that sheltered a busy harbor. I discovered just how busy within minutes of climbing stiffly out of the SUV. I ran straight into an artery of people filling both sidewalks of the street. They flowed from one of the biggest cruise ships I had ever seen (a large one can carry five thousand people). Apparently, Ålesund is a regular stop on the cruise circuit. The crowd sounded British. Many were elderly. I joined the slow-moving throng, feeling tired and nonsocial. Reaching a small bridge that spanned a narrow lane of water wedged between two rows of attractive multi-story buildings, I waited my turn to take a photo. In 1904, Ålesund burned down in a catastrophic fire. A rebuilding program implemented a decorative style that has become irresistible to cruising travelers, along with the deep water port. The city has another distinction, however. According to legend, Ålesund is the hometown of Rollo/Hrólf the Walker, who was born on a nearby island. I knew there was a statue of the intrepid viking in a park somewhere, but it could wait. After snapping photos from the bridge, I decided to

find my overnight accommodation, located on the lower level of a house not far away. The online ad promised an inspiring view of the harbor and the fjord. Mostly, I wanted a nap.

Later, I walked back to the pretty city. The tourists had departed, leaving me to stare into shop windows and wander the waterfront alone. I noticed a sailing ship docked at a pier. As I approached, I heard rounds of loud cheers. A sign announced the ship to be a floating high school of American origin. Students were arrayed across its deck listening to a teacher or a crew member. They cheered again. While walking earlier, I spied a group of young people chanting and carrying signs as they marched along a street, looking like a protest. It was the students, I realized. Good for them. Raise some hell. And as much as possible! It wasn't idle advice. At the apartment, I had suspended my news embargo in preparation for the trip home only to learn that the previous day, July 3rd, 2023, was the hottest day on Earth in recorded history. If that weren't disturbing enough, scientists predicted the record would be broken today! I reinstated the news embargo.



Selfie with port

Seeking supper, I found a cozy restaurant. A waiter led me to a table, I tried to ignore the empty chair across from me, but when the waiter returned to light a solitary candle, I lost it. Tears came again. I had been doing so well. It wasn't just soloness. I missed *Gen*. There was so much to tell her. It wasn't just words, I missed all the little things that were part of our long relationship. Laughter, for instance, and the comfort we felt in each other's company. I missed sharing memories, too. We collected a huge storehouse of memories together over the years and would often tap it on trips, evoking past journeys and shared adventures. The warehouse was mine now, alone. The tears ebbed. Watching the candle, I thought about rivers, watersheds, boats, and sailing



solo. It wasn't just about writing a family story. In Avaldsnes, I saw a destination: the Sagalands. My family watershed. Getting to them would require a physical as well as a mental journey. It would be hard, but I've never shied from hard things. This was the purpose I needed. Sail to the Sagalands, explore their shores and waterways, tell their stories, have an adventure. I decided to go.

After supper, I headed down to the water again. Tomorrow would bring another long day of driving, this time to a hotel at the Oslo airport.

Before leaving in the morning, I'd pop down the hill briefly for a photograph of Rollo's statue. Walking through the deserted town that evening made Ålesund feel a bit like Disneyland after hours. It was a nice counterpoint to my first morning in Copenhagen, where the streets and stores felt ready for the day. Here, they seemed ready for a night's slumber. I felt the same way. It was great to be in Europe, but I was ready to go home.

I made my way onto a small jetty in the harbor. Did Rollo sail from Ålesund? I'm going to say he did. Why not? He left from someplace, why not this lovely port? Maybe he sailed down to Avaldsnes, quarreled with King Harald Fairhair, and sailed on to Iceland or England to make his fortune before heading to northern France. The viking life was peripatetic. Plunder and move on. Even their settlements could be transitory. Viking attempts at permanent colonies in Germany, Brittany, and North America all failed. Rollo's colony stuck, however. The treaty he negotiated with King Charles the Simple of France held, allowing the colony to stabilize and grow. Rollo's grandson, Richard I, reigned as Duke for fifty-four years, cementing the viking – now Norman – grip on the territory. Why not think it all started here in Ålesund?

It felt like a great place to start a new journey.



Rollo



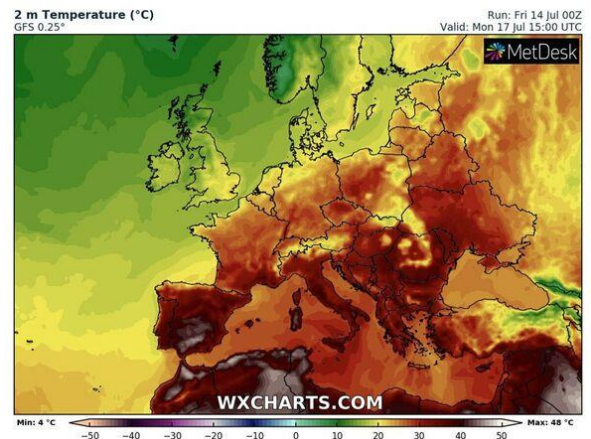
Alba

I couldn't believe it.

Minutes away from boarding my flight from Santa Fe to Dallas in late August, an airport employee announced on the public address system, sounding like the voice of God in the tiny and packed departure lounge, that the plane was experiencing a software issue and would be delayed. My prayers had failed. I leaned wearily against a wall as a flashback from my disastrous outbound trip to Copenhagen two months earlier flooded in: a canceled flight, two delayed ones, seven hours in crazily crowded Heathrow airport, a midnight arrival in the Danish capital, lost luggage, and a long wait for a train downtown that netted me a 3am arrival at my hotel. Although my destination was different this time – Edinburgh – the two stopovers were the same. I had tempted the travel gods with my repeated itinerary, I knew, and now they were sniggering. Fortunately, after thirty minutes they relented, and I boarded the plane in time to make the connection in Dallas. I shifted my prayers to Heathrow. It wasn't simply a matter of being inconvenienced; there was a far more important reason I didn't want to be delayed.

I would be meeting my children.

For a while, I wasn't sure there would even be a trip to Scotland. During the summer, the world erupted in heat and fire – when it wasn't being drowned in biblical rain storms and flooding. In fact, 2023 may enter the record books as the year climate change officially began to bite *hard*. Over a stretch of four days – July 3rd to 6th – the global average temperature became the hottest in recorded history, topping out at an unprecedented 17.23°C (63.02°F) on July 6th – a full degree more than the same date in 2022. The news wasn't anomalous, unfortunately. For the ninth year in a row, the planet had just endured its warmest June on record. Deadly heat waves had struck China, Mexico, India, and Texas where the heat index (humidity + temperature) reached a brutal 107 degrees F. Winter sea ice near Antarctica fell to record lows, while sea surface temperatures in the North Atlantic were 1.6 C warmer than average, breaking records by wide margins. In southern Europe, two intense heat waves were given names from Greek mythology connected with the Underworld – *Cerberus* and *Charon*.



The Charon Heat Wave

July beat June as the planet’s hottest month. August brought more of the same. Canada’s six thousand wildfires continued to rage and would ultimately consume forty-five million acres, beating the previous record by *thirty million acres*. On Maui, a fast-moving wildfire nearly wiped out the historic town of Lahaina, killing a hundred people and destroying two thousand buildings. A massive heat dome in the central and southern U.S. – one of a series – put 143 million Americans under Extreme Heat alerts. The heat index in Lawrence, Kansas, hit 134 degrees on August 20th. Phoenix, my hometown, endured a hellish summer of relentless heat with fifty-four days above 110 degrees, shattering long-standing records. Torrential rains devastated parts of India, Slovenia, Greece, Mexico, South Korea, and Norway. In early September, researchers declared the summer of 2023 to be the hottest in 174 years of record-keeping. They said half of the world’s population experienced higher than normal temperatures as a result of climate change. While some of the heat could be linked to the onset of a weather phenomenon called *El Niño*, scientists said the severity of climate impacts were accelerating on their own. They also said the summer of 2023 would likely be the coolest one for the rest of our lives.

Waiting impatiently in the Santa Fe airport, I didn’t want to think about climate change. I just wanted to see my kids. Fortunately, the travel gods smiled on me for the rest of the outbound



Olivia and Sterling in Edinburgh

trip – or were distracted. I’ll take distracted. It was similar for Olivia and Sterling, who enjoyed smooth journeys to Edinburgh. I found Olivia in an airport café and joined her for a much anticipated cappuccino. Sterling arrived two hours later. We gave each other a huge three-way hug. It was so good to see their smiles again! We didn’t spend nearly enough time together, especially on trips, a family specialty. Olivia lived in western Massachusetts where she stayed after graduating from Mt. Holyoke College in 2021. Sterling remained in Portland, Oregon, after graduating from Reed College the same year (they’re twins). They came home to Santa Fe during the Covid pandemic, but now they were settled into their lives, far away. But here we were traveling together again, warming my heart!

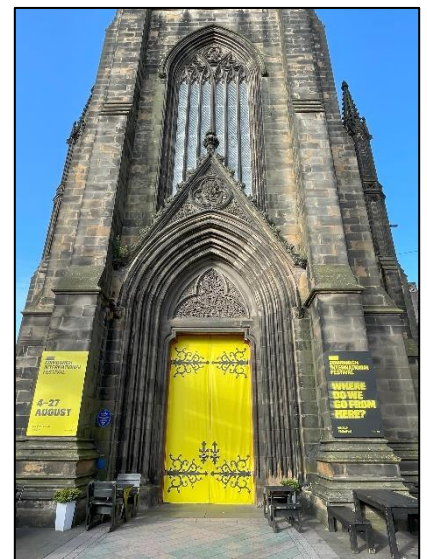
It was going to be a great trip, I just knew it.

We took the tram downtown under sunny skies. I had been watching the weather forecasts like a hawk every day, worried that our two-week sojourn together would be marred by Scotland’s

famously wet weather. To my relief, at the last moment a sun symbol replaced rain clouds in the forecast. We walked from the tram station to the Old Waverly Hotel, located on a busy boulevard at the edge of New Town. They gave us a room on the top floor with a dramatic view of medieval Old Town a short distance to the south. The tiny room was packed with twin beds, reminding me of a similarly cramped hotel room in Barcelona the four of us shared, years ago. In the street, a musician played bagpipes. Edinburgh! We set out immediately. Crossing over the railroad tracks, we climbed steep and curvy Cockburn Street. It was full-on classic Europe, with lovely buildings, boutique shops, and tempting eateries with tables outside. I detected a theme to the shops right away: coffee, whiskey, and scarves. I would be a disappointing tourist for the locals. I didn't drink whiskey or need a scarf. Coffee, yes. Lots of coffee. For everything else that wasn't food, beer, or admission fees, no. Sterling and Olivia felt the same way, though Sterling was intrigued by the idea of trying a glass or two of whiskey. He certainly had plenty of choices!

Hitting High Street, we turned right and strolled toward Edinburgh Castle, weaving around knots of people. This was the famous Royal Mile, which stretches along a ridge between the Castle and royal Holyrood Palace to the east. My guidebook said it was one Europe's must-sees despite the crowds. Actually, the tourist congestion wasn't bad. I had booked us to arrive on the final day of the Edinburgh International Festival, a popular month-long revel of theatre and music. It included a 'fringe' festival of more daring shows, whose adverts were plastered on every pole and wall. The plan had been to witness the massive fireworks show over Edinburgh Castle that traditionally closes the Festival, but it had been cancelled, alas. Maybe thinner crowds was our bonus.

As we walked past the Festival headquarters in an old church, the event's motto caught my eye: *Where Do We Go From Here?* I did a quick search. It was borrowed from Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Apparently, it was King's message of hope to the world. Festival Director Nicola Benedetti explained: "I am moved by the power and urgency of [King's] mission...in the face of brutality, irrational hatred, and closed-minded certitude. Under unimaginable and constant pressure, he never stopped believing in people's capacity to unite and elevate around an exalted purpose." What a cool theme for an arts festival!



Festival headquarters



At the Rialto Bridge in Venice (2010)

We widened our rambling beyond the Royal Mile. We chatted and laughed as we walked, falling easily into our comfortable and intimate travel mode, honed over many trips made together as a family. This one was a consolation for me. Originally, I had planned to come to Scotland with Gen. Our goal was to hike the length of Hadrian's Wall, a famous stony relic from the Roman Empire. As an archaeologist, it had been on Gen's 'Must See' list for a long time. Mine too. After an energizing trip to Prague and Berlin to see Olivia during the summer of 2019, amidst financial and medical stresses, we decided to take the

plunge. Our plan was to fly to Edinburgh, rent a car, drive to England, hike the 70-mile Wall trail – where we would celebrate my 60th birthday – then make a looping drive around Scotland back to the capital. I had a feeling it would be a special trip, so I spent many hours working out the logistics. Finally, everything was in place. It was February 2020. You know what happened next. Covid. Trip cancelled. That was hard but I kept things in perspective. Gen's cancer meant she was part of the at-risk population, so we decided to keep a low profile. I shelved our Scotland plans for post-pandemic. Very sadly we never went. In 2021, Gen endured heart surgery as part of her cancer treatment. It was supposed to add years to her life. However, the cancer suddenly began spreading rapidly, reinfecting her heart. After her memorial, Sterling suggested we go to Scotland and visit Hadrian's Wall for her. I thought it was a great idea. We decided to go.

After catch-up naps back at the hotel, we headed out for our first supper in Scotland – at an Italian restaurant. We fell to gabbing right away. Sterling, the older twin by six minutes (as he keeps reminding his sister), is as garrulous as Olivia is quiet. Both benefitted massively from the two years they spent as actors in a youth Shakespeare troupe in Santa Fe, performing in multiple plays including the leads in two separate casts of *Hamlet* (see my essay [Will](#)). The experience gave Sterling the self-assurance to become the charming, well-spoken person he is today (he had always been talkative as a child). For Olivia, acting went a long way to helping her overcome a deep shyness and boost her self-confidence, though she still struggles to get a word in when her brother is around. We were a tight family growing up, and the kids developed a close bond that is still strong today despite the distance that separates them, also warming my heart.

Early next morning, we kept our appointment at Edinburgh Castle, located on a volcanic rock with a commanding view of the city, literally. During its 1000-year history, Edinburgh Castle was attacked twenty-six times, earning the honor of being the most besieged castle in Great Britain. It played a prominent role in the Wars of Scottish Independence in the 14th century, switching hands between English and Scottish armies numerous times. A devastating twelve-day siege in 1573 by an English army, which fired three thousand cannon balls at the Castle, reduced most of the medieval structures to rubble. Sieges in the 1640s, followed by extensive rebuilding, created the Castle we see today. I thought it was rather dull. It had tremendous views of the city, but there wasn't much of interest inside, including an uninspiring Great Hall. The exception was tiny, humble St.

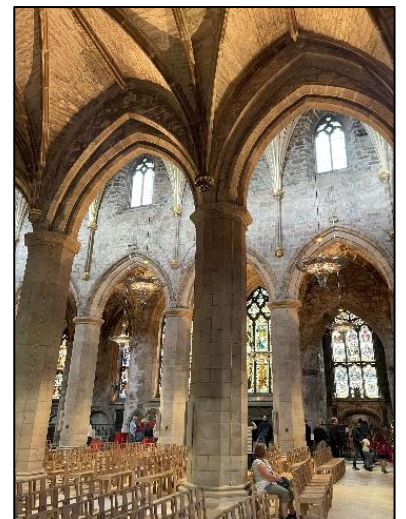


Historical relics at the Castle

Margaret's Chapel, the oldest surviving building in Edinburgh. It was built by King David I in the early 12th century to honor his pious mother, Margaret, an English princess who fled to Scotland with her brother in the wake of William the Conqueror's victory at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 (her brother was heir to the English throne). She married King Malcom III and had eight children. Three sons became King of Scotland, including David I, the youngest, who reigned for thirty years (1124-1153). A daughter married King Henry I of England, becoming Queen. Following a stream of fellow tourists, I entered the cramped chapel for a look. It was more than curiosity. King David was a direct ancestor of mine. It was another reason I wanted to visit Scotland.

It was part of the Sagalands.

Exiting the castle, we set out on the Royal Mile for Holyrood Palace. On the way, we took a detour into St. Giles Cathedral. I am not a huge fan of ecclesiastical architecture (churches tend to blur together in my mind), but this one was pretty – and nine hundred years old. It was also built by King David I, part of his highly consequential run as Scotland's monarch. Apparently, David and his siblings spent part of their youth at the English court, which may explain how his sister Margaret caught the roving eye of young Henry I (who would sire at least twenty illegitimate children). Their royal marriage made David brother-in-law to the King of England, a useful connection, and caused him to adopt Norman ways, becoming "civilized."



St. Giles Cathedral

A contemporary historian of the era, William of Malmesbury, wrote that David I “rubbed off all tarnish of Scottish barbarity through being polished by intercourse and friendship with us.” David went on to implement important reforms to Scotland during his reign, including the introduction of Norman-style feudalism and knighthood, the founding of monasteries and regional markets, the adoption of Norman architecture, and the strengthening of royal authority. Scholars call what happened the ‘Davidian Revolution’ and credit it with modernizing Scotland – in a medieval sense. David was a member of the royal House of Dunkeld, named for his ambitious grandfather King Duncan I, who reigned from 1034 to 1040 before being killed by Macbeth – yes, *that Macbeth!* Shakespeare, by the way, got almost all of it wrong. For my purposes, it is David I’s son, Henry, that matters. Through Henry Dunkeld’s marriage to Ada de Warenne – supposedly a love-match – and a subsequent child, Henry linked together two important branches of my *de Lacy* family watershed, Warenne and Bohun, thus becoming part of my family saga. I’ll call it *Dunkeld Creek*. It arose obscurely in misty headwaters among highland mountains and valleys in a land called...

Alba. The ancient name for Scotland.

Sterling skipped out on us in the evening. He had two college chums in town, Jack, who had studied viking history at a Scottish university up north, and Ethan, who was studying Welsh history in Wales. Ethan brought his girlfriend, also a student. They all went out drinking. Olivia and I found a historic pub along the Royal Mile and slipped into a corner booth for supper. I love pubs. I love the noise, the laughter, the dark wood, the chummy proximity of fellow pub-goers, the beer, of course, and even the food. According to the author of my guidebook, pub grub had improved considerably in recent years, though it still had a ways to go. I didn’t mind. As long as there was sticky toffee pudding! It was wonderful have Olivia to myself for a moment. She was an English major in college and would like to become a writer but is unclear on next steps. She’s apprehensive about the financial debt that graduate school would involve. She’s also worried about where things are going, particularly in the United States. Recent, awful Supreme Court decisions combined with cultural backsliding on a number of key social issues have soured her somewhat on America. She’s sweetest person I know, so that says a lot. I’ve tried to reassure her as best as I can, but it’s got to be tough for young people. When I was her age – 25 in 1985 – prospects felt bright, or at least well-defined. Now, they’re incredibly complex. Olivia’s response is to burrow. Focus on her group of close friends, her job at an organic bakery, ignore social media, and save her pennies. Sounds like a plan. I bought the meal and gave her a big hug.

The next day, we went for a hike. The target was Arthur's Seat, another volcanic plug, though one without a mighty castle on its summit. Instead, it was besieged by day hikers. The well-worn path started near the Scottish Parliament building, a modernist oddity that contrasted sharply

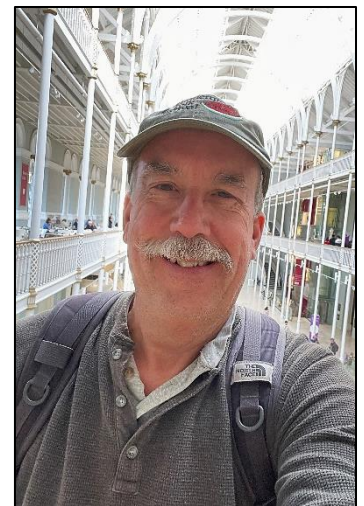


Olivia holding up the chapel

with the stately Holyrood Palace across the street, perhaps deliberately. It stirred up quite a controversy when it opened in 2004, possibly because it is so ugly. I've never understood modernism, especially in architecture. Alienation isn't my thing. I prefer human-scaled, lived-in, harmonious buildings. Take our first stop on the hike, a ruined medieval chapel with a forty-foot tower. Located on a small outcropping with a great view, it had all the right stuff. After summiting Arthur's Seat in a stiff breeze, we headed back down the trail and back up the Royal Mile. We skipped the Palace, maintaining my refusal to sightsee the historic excesses of royalty, though it meant missing the ruins of Holyrood Abbey, founded in 1128 by – you guessed it – King David I. Thrown from his horse and nearly gored by a

charging stag, David claimed he was saved by the appearance of the Holy Cross (*Rood*) in the sky. He founded the abbey in gratitude.

I wanted to have lunch outside, so we picked a hip eatery near Edinburgh Castle. It took me a moment to realize the restaurant didn't have waiters. Scan your order and wait for a robot to bring the meal. That's what it felt like. More digital dehumanization, I complained to the kids. They agreed. When they were young, Gen and I refused to give them access to electronics until they learned to read. They didn't get cell phones until they were fourteen. It meant they were late to the digital revolution, but it also meant they grew up among analog things, such as being outside and interacting with human beings face-to-face. Both said they were grateful. After lunch, we went to the National Museum of Scotland, where the issue of progress came up again. After visiting the early Scotland history rooms, I found myself unexpectedly in the middle of the Industrial Revolution. It was a period brimming with Scottish scientists, engineers, inventors, poets, philosophers, and novelists. It was also a time of darkness, greed, and cruelty, as Charles Dickens taught us. The museum artfully dodged the ugly stuff, which was fine. I was tired of revolutions, so I stepped into the Great Hall for a selfie instead.



Selfie with museum

As I waited for the kids to emerge from the depths of the museum, the arts festival theme came back to mind. *Where Do We Go From Here?* The short answer: back to the hotel for a nap! The longer answer is harder. *Chaos or Community?* It was a great question in 1967 that's become more urgent today given fast-moving events, particularly on the climate front. My heart ached for



Sterling heading to D.C.

the kids. In high school, Sterling was selected to attend Boys State, where he got all fired up about politics and policy. He spent six weeks one hot summer in Washington, D.C., as an intern for New Mexico's Senator Tom Udall (D). At Reed, he studied political science and environmental policy, including western water law. For his Senior thesis, he analyzed climate policy during the Obama Administration. Next up was law school, he said. After graduation, he worked in a Portland law office that specialized in patents and trademarks. He didn't like it. His favorite class at Reed involved trees – actual trees – so he applied for a job in the Urban Forestry department at the City of Portland. He got it. He loves the work and is content. He's not as fired up about politics and prefers not to discuss news or trouble ahead. Olivia feels

the same way. Both of them would rather focus on Community – their friends, their jobs, their interests – right now, not Chaos. I totally get it. I tilted at windmills for most of my adult life. No regrets. But I feel at a loss for advice. Things are more chaotic today than at any point in my life and the need for community has never been greater, but I'm not sure how to get there in this unreal digital universe that we've created.

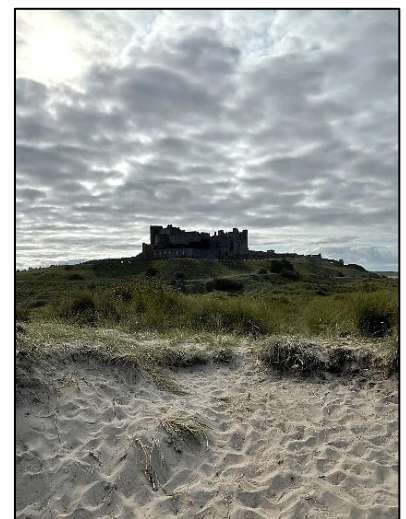
Sterling's friend Jack joined us for supper at a pub in Grassmarket Square, formerly the place to go to buy a cow or watch a public hanging. Over beers, we agreed that Edinburgh was a great city, prompting Olivia to say she'd consider moving here if things continued to go south in America. Jack backed her up, though he tossed in a word of caution about long Scottish winters. The conversation moved on to friends, school tales, and shared interests. I felt self-consciously the elder at the table. I kept quiet mostly, until the subject turned to viking history, which Jack had studied for a master's degree. I went full Rollo: Scandinavia, Normandy, England, the Siege of Paris in 875 AD, slavery, booty, assimilation. Jack gave me a wonderful look: *who is this old guy?* I smiled and returned to my beer. After a while, I closed my eyes, feeling the effects of the alcohol. I listened to the happy buzz of the pub, whose patrons seemed close to Sterling and Olivia's age. It was a university town as well as an artistic mecca for young people, which added to Edinburgh's

appeal for Olivia. My thoughts drifted back to my life after graduate school in Los Angeles, when Gen and I were young. A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. I opened my eyes, feeling sad. Gen. Listening to the youthful, boisterous sounds all around me, I missed my generational buddy. I wanted to hear her laugh and get her thoughts. Be a family again, traveling together. I finished my beer. Life is a journey. Some parts you can control, many you cannot. You work hard to create community and pray the chaos is manageable. There's joy and sadness. Hopefully, the balance is ultimately tipped in favor of joy by whatever forces are in charge of our lives: genes, upbringing, plans, choices, whims of deities, laws of physics. If not, we do the best we can. Have a beer. Laugh. Remember.

And keep going.



We made it to Bamburgh Castle alive. Actually, the drive wasn't so bad. After booking the trip, I began to feel anxious about the novelty of driving on the wrong side of the road, compounded by a choice: standard or automatic? In Europe, I always rent a stick-shift, which I love to drive. They are also cheaper. But the shifting would be left-handed this time. Online, I was relieved to find this advice: skip the extra stress, go automatic. So, I did. Everything went smoothly, though there were a few hair-raising moments in the roundabouts. Sterling and Olivia took turns being the digital navigator, which helped a lot. "Take the third exit on the next roundabout," one would cheerfully instruct. If I fumbled it, we just went around again! Traffic was heavy and the roads narrow, including the A1 highway – a major artery known as the Great North Road – which we hopped on. I immediately missed the wide, speedy Interstates of the U.S. We reached Bamburgh Castle in the late afternoon. It's an icon of sorts for us, having been a part of *The Last Kingdom*, a viking-themed TV series that we watched and thoroughly enjoyed. Alas, there wasn't enough time to tour the castle before closing, so we made our way to the beach instead. I had never confronted the North Sea before, much less stepped foot on an English beach, so I wasn't sure what to expect. It looked pretty much like a beach – sand, waves, beachgoers, dogs running loose. I stuck my hands in the water. Cold! North Sea. Check. Done that!



Bamburgh Castle by the sea

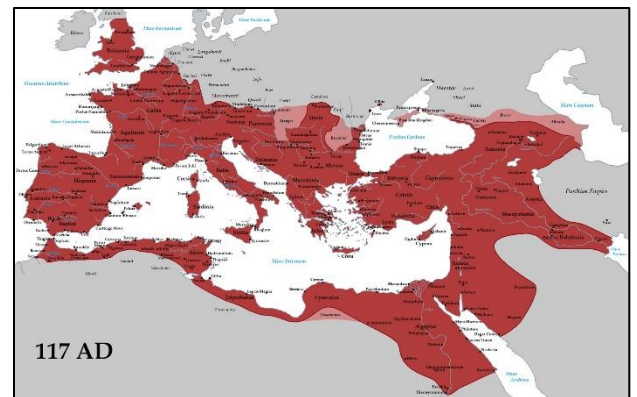
We made it to Hadrian's Wall just before sunset. We threw our things into our room at the Twice Brewed Inn, a busy enterprise that we liked immediately, and then drove across the road to a trailhead called Steel Rigg. We hustled to the Wall and pulled out our cameras – phones for me and Olivia, a digital SLR for Sterling. The evening was glorious, warm, clear, with pastoral views



Hadrian's Wall on our hike

of farmland and soft hills. It was so good to be here! We got an early start the next morning, planning to spend the entire day walking on the Wall path. My prayers to the weather gods were answered – the day was sunny. We headed east. Construction on the wall began circa 122 AD on orders from Hadrian, the Roman Emperor, likely during a visit to Britannia. Under Trajan, Hadrian's predecessor, the Roman Empire reached its maximum size, encompassing nearly two million square miles (two-thirds the size of the continental U.S.). It included what today are North Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, Turkey, Greece, southern Europe, Spain, France, and parts of Germany and England – essentially the entire known world at the time. The Romans were highly skilled at conquering, but it had become too much. Trajan

expanded the Empire by capturing Dacia (modern Romania), but it took two costly wars. Hadrian had other ideas. He preferred consolidation, administration, and large-scale building projects. Such as a wall. Building a long one across the northern neck of Britannia suited his needs. It marked the boundary of 'civilization' in no uncertain terms, it kept the Picts and other barbarians to the north at bay, and it allowed the Empire to focus on settlement and exploitation – also Roman specialties.



The Roman Empire at its maximum extent

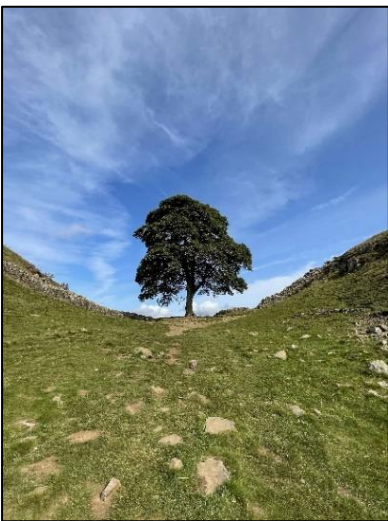
Walking at different speeds, we spread out along the path, with Sterling zipping ahead. He and Olivia have always had a 'tortoise-and-hare' relationship as twins. Things came more easily for him, partly because American society favors boys over girls (let's be frank). He'd zoom ahead socially or academically while Olivia worked doggedly to get to the same places. Sterling knew everyone at their charter public high school, while Olivia struggled to overcome her shyness. She had an extra challenge. Born with a cleft palate, which affected an ear, she endured years of doctor

visits and orthodontia work. She remained cheery despite it all. Meanwhile, Sterling sailed along. So, when he eventually needed glasses, I bet Olivia did a silent fist pump. It tickled me to watch them walk along the wall path. Sterling would cruise ahead before stopping to take photographs, which allowed Olivia to catch up. Then they would take pictures together. For my part, I kept getting distracted by the Wall itself. After the Romans departed Britannia in the 5th century, the edifice deteriorated. Local farmers began scavenging its stones for their own walls and buildings. It was saved from oblivion by John Clayton, a clerk from Newcastle, who purchased sections in the late 19th century for preservation and study. Unfortunately, Clayton rebuilt long stretches of the Wall using non-Roman construction methods, causing heartburn among archaeologists later. In any case, the Wall is impressive to look upon. I loved the texture of the stones and kept stopping to take photos. It gave me an idea. In Scandinavia, I took photos of different historical pavements under my shoes, as Gen liked to do on our trips. In Alba, I'd shoot walls instead.



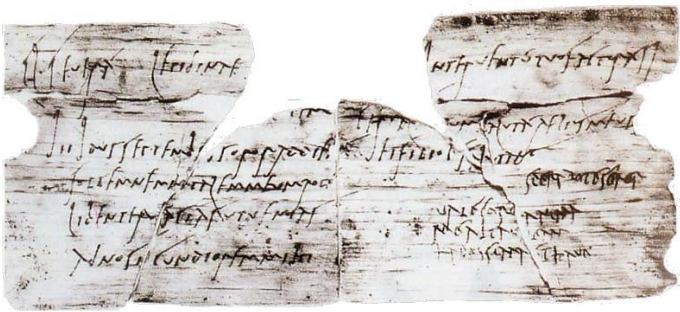
Pattern #1 (Hadrian)

I caught up with the kids at the famous Sycamore Gap tree. Estimated to be three hundred years old, the venerable tree had the good fortune to grow in one of the most photogenic spots along the Wall. The



tree shot to fame when it starred in the 1991 film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. It became a national icon and perhaps the most photographed tree in the UK. In 2016, it was voted England's Tree of the Year. People have proposed under the tree, been married there, and had ashes of loved ones scattered there. I considered it. We were enchanted by the spot, taking many photos, especially Sterling who clicked away energetically. After taking my fill, I walked under the tree and sat on the edge of the Wall. This is where I planned to be on my 60th birthday in 2020, enjoying a contemplative celebration with Gen. Unfortunately, the gods played a cruel trick on all of us. Not only did they release the deadly and highly contagious Covid virus into the world, they did so during the presidency of the malign and utterly incompetent Donald J. Trump. One wonders what would have happened with a different president. That was an eon ago, however. Today, I was happy to sit on the Wall and watch my children enjoy the memorable moment under sunny English skies.

The next day we stopped at Vindolanda, a major Roman fort in the area and home to one of the best private museums I've ever encountered. Expecting a brief visit, we stayed until closing time. We began by lingering in the ruins of the fort and adjacent village, impressed by the extensive walls and rooms exposed for curious eyes. The site had been purchased in the 1930s by Professor Eric Birley, a lecturer and archaeologist who specialized in the history of the Roman occupation of northern England. The excavations in the ruins that he began have continued under the direction of his family and have produced spectacular discoveries, including the famous Vindolanda tablets.



The birthday party invitation by Claudia Severa

Written in the 2nd century AD – contemporary with Hadrian's Wall – these postcard-sized, handwritten notes, often in cursive Latin, capture day-to-day life in a Roman military fort in ways that are both banal and timeless. The most famous tablet is an invitation from the Commander's wife to a friend inviting her to a birthday party. A few of the tablets can be seen in a darkened room in

the museum, but what I like most were the displays of everyday artifacts: boxing gloves (a rare find), coins, pendants, figurines of household deities, fancy ceramic dinner sets imported from France, and worn-out sandals of all shapes and sizes for all kinds of people. There was an entire room focused on wood, critical to every part of life on the frontier, and another room dedicated to the story of the excavations themselves.

Vindolanda operated from 85 AD until 370, when it was abandoned as part of a pull-back by the Romans. Forty years later, they packed up and left Britannia altogether. The legions were moved to the mainland in a desperate effort to stop 'barbarian' armies from overrunning the Empire. It didn't work. In 410, Rome was sacked by the Visigoths. It happened again in 455, this time at the hand of the Vandals, who pillaged the great city for two weeks. In Britannia, the native chieftains were undoubtedly relieved to see the backsides of their occupiers. What happened next, however, was probably not what they expected. In the power vacuum left by the Roman departure, a group of German tribes invaded Britain, including Angles, Jutes, and Saxons. Chaos ensued for centuries. Britons fought the Germans, the invaders fought each other, chieftains killed rivals, sons murdered fathers, brothers killed brothers, and armies clashed continuously. Eventually, seven kingdoms arose from the chaos, including Wessex in southern Britain. They emerged, however,

just in time to be devastated by waves of viking armies in the 9th century, including the Great Heathen Army of 865. Every kingdom was overrun by vikings except for Wessex – the ‘last kingdom’ – which rallied under the leadership of Alfred the Great (another ancestor of mine, but that’s another story). King Alfred established an uneasy truce in the 880s, but chaos and violence broke out again between Britons and vikings lasting nearly two hundred more years. Matters were finally settled in 1066 when King Harold of England caught an invading viking army by surprise near York and wiped them out for good – only to be wiped out himself less than a month later by Rollo’s great, great, great grandson.

William the Conqueror.



After an overnight stay near Carlisle, we headed north. Bypassing Glasgow, we crossed the Firth of Clyde and drove along the bonnie banks of Loch Lomond of folk song fame. Taking the high road, we soon found ourselves in Trossachs National Park, created in 2002 to preserve the natural beauty of the area. We were amazed. As the road rose, the trees fell away, revealing stunning vistas in all directions. This was the southern edge of the famous Scottish Highlands, a geological, cultural, and linguistically distinct region. It was the historical home to fiercely independent clans, fearless rebels, and hardy warriors toughened by an unforgiving landscape (especially in winter). Ask the Romans. The northern and western regions of the Highlands were the home of the Picts, a Celtic-speaking tribe that caught the attention of the Romans when they attacked Hadrian’s Wall in 297 AD. Not much is known about the Picts, except that they waged war continuously against occupiers, Romans first, then the Germans. By the 7th century, contemporary chroniclers were referring to the region as *Pictland*, ruled by a Pictish king. Then came the vikings, who attacked all the coasts and created settlements in the Orkney and Hebrides Islands. In reaction, Kenneth MacAlpin (Cináed), King of the Picts, conquered all rival kings in the mid-840s and declared the combined land to be the *Kingdom of Alba* – setting the stage for the birth of modern Scotland.



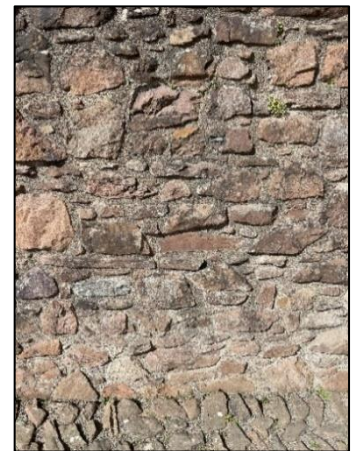
In the Highlands



Urquhart Castle and Loch Ness

The next day, we stopped at Urquhart Castle, perched on the western shore of Loch Ness. I'm not a Bucket List type of person, but if I were, the famed lake would be on it. I am definitely not a monster believer, however, which likely places me in the minority where Nellie is concerned. Two weeks before our visit, volunteers spread out along the shores of Loch Ness in what organizers said was the largest Nellie search in fifty years. Employing high-tech drones, advanced sonar, and hundreds of people scanning the lake's waves online, it was the most

sophisticated search ever. The result was the same. No monster. As for us, we just wanted to see the lake from the ramparts of the attractive castle. The rocky promontory was first fortified during Pictish times and an early version of Urquhart Castle was built in the 12th century, possibly by Highland rebels opposed to the rule of King David I. During the 1300s, the castle became contested ground during the Wars of Independence, as competing English and Scottish armies vied for control of the Great Glen Way, a natural highway which slices diagonally across the Highlands. In the 1500s, Urquhart Castle was the focus of a struggle between two Highland clans, culminating in 1545 with the 'Great Raid' in which the MacDonald clan stole two thousand cattle from the Grant clan and stripped the castle of furniture, cannon, and even its gates.



Pattern #2 (Urquhart)

We stopped for supper in Kilmore, a small village nearby. We ordered beers and sat outside on a lovely evening, laughing, and talking. It was so much fun to travel with Sterling and Olivia. Mature, thoughtful, and considerate, they were ideal companions. That they were my children was a bonus – and a source of pride. Nostalgia too. I awoke the next morning in our room at the bed-



and-breakfast in Inverness to a sight that made my heart ache. The room had a slanted ceiling and the kids slept in twin beds across from each other, looking almost exactly like they did in an A-frame that we stayed in during our visits to the James Ranch, north of Durango, Colorado, when they were kids. One particular memory stands out. In June 2004, I was feeling highly stressed by an office situation at Quivira, so I scooped up the five-year old kids and whisked them to Durango for four days. It was heaven. We walked

all over town, ate at our favorite Mexican restaurant, and spent an entire day on the steam train that runs to Silverton and back. When we returned to A-frame that evening, we were covered in soot, exhilarated, and exhausted. When I checked on Sterling and Olivia the next morning, I saw the same image that I saw in Inverness. Our time together in Durango restored my spirits. I returned home reinvigorated for what lay ahead. I felt the same about our time together in Scotland. Twenty years on, travel and family still had the power to heal.

We spent the following day on the remote and magnificent Isle of Skye – where our Highland history lesson continued amidst a crush of traffic. We crossed a narrow strait to the island on the Skye Bridge which opened in 1995, ending centuries of ferrying from the mainland (the



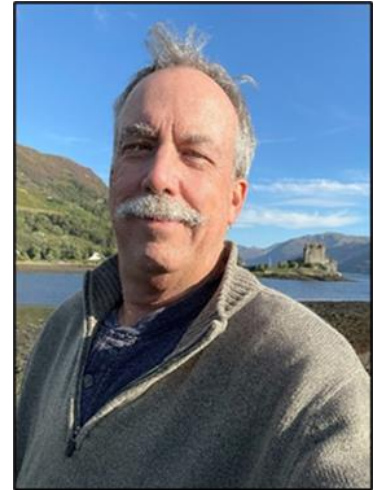
A working phone booth on Skye

crossing brought to mind the *Skye Boat Song*, one of my favorites, originally sung by Skye-landers as they rowed people across the water). Skye is famous for its austere beauty, dominated by treeless valleys and windswept crags. It did not disappoint. Although the bumper-to-bumper traffic glued my attention to the road, I received regular reports from the kids about the spectacular scenery. Finally, we pulled over. Wow. Skye fell under viking control in the 9th century and is mentioned in Norse sagas, where its name can be translated as ‘Island of Clouds’ – a moniker easy to believe. Speaking of vikings, there is a Scottish connection with Rollo, the famous viking who led the colonization of Normandy. The *Orkneyinga Saga*, written in Iceland in the 13th century, chronicles the long line of viking jarls (earls) who ruled the Orkney Islands in northern

Scotland, including Sigurd Eysteinnsson who, supposedly, was the father of Hrólfr Rognvaldsson – aka Rollo. The Icelandic sagas are full of great stories but are notoriously suspect as histories. Nevertheless, there is a Rollo clan in Scotland which claims ancestry from the wandering viking. It first appears in a 1141 AD charter issued by an ally of King David I. Based at Duncrub Castle near Perth, the clan has had fourteen Lord Rollos, stretching back to Anthony Rollo (1577-1659). The current Lord, David Howard Rollo (born in 1943) is officially a member of the Peerage of Scotland and a member of Parliament.

After lunch in Portree, Skye’s main town, we drove around the mesmerizing Trotternish Peninsula. Although there wasn’t much traffic, the road narrowed to a single lane, requiring negotiations with oncoming vehicles. At the tip of the peninsula, we stopped to see Duntulm

Castle, where an extremely strong sea breeze nearly blew us off our feet. At the end of the long, beautiful drive around the peninsula, we stopped in Portree again for cappuccinos. We were in no hurry to return to Inverness and kept pulling over for more photos, including requisite selfies. Tomorrow, we would begin the drive down the eastern side of Scotland, eventually returning to Edinburgh – and home. I wasn't ready. I wanted the trip to go on and on. That's one of the challenges with travel, there comes a point when you realize you're on the road to home. For some, I suppose it happens on the taxi ride to the airport, or maybe during supper the night before. For me, it always comes earlier. All my life, I've been sensitive to turning points, arcs, and thresholds. Spotting a rainbow always feels portentous. I don't know why. Perhaps it has something to do with an overactive imagination. Of course, big parts of life are straight lines, not circles. Your children won't be kids again. You can't have your spouse back. But that's why we take trips. Their circularity is a blessing. Finishing a journey means we get to travel to someplace new. I was already looking forward to 2024!



Selfie with castle



We arrived in Aberdeen feeling as gray as the weather. The A96 highway from Inverness to Aberdeen was packed with vehicles the entire way. Speeds were slow and traffic jams frequent, testing my patience and my bladder, not to mention my lower back muscles. Olivia and Sterling calmly navigated us to our destination with skill and good cheer. Sterling gave me reassuring and much appreciated neck rubs. We planned to visit a castle on the way, but we were making such slow progress that we skipped. Then we lost the sun. Reaching Aberdeen, we headed downtown in search of supper. Aberdeen's architecture matched the weather, gray and cool. After a long search for a parking spot, we made our way to a colorful restaurant in what looked like a former church. The attractive outdoor seating area was full. While the kids kept an eye out for a table, I stepped inside. The place was packed with people. Happy, noisy people. A DJ stood in a pulpit cranking out upbeat tunes. What was going on? Sterling's friend Jack, who had attended the university here, warned us that Aberdeen was dull, dull, dull – but this looked like a great party! The kids secured a table outside, and as we settled in I scrutinized our fellow diners. Drinking and laughing, nearly all were male, white, and thirty-ish, though some were in their forties and fifties.

Their attire was office casual. A few wore name badges. Ah. I queried our waiter. A conference, he replied with a shrug. Curious, I pulled out my phone. Not just any conference, I discovered, but the annual meeting of Offshore Europe – the trade association of North Sea oil and gas developers. More searching revealed this news: in July, Rishi Sunak, the UK’s conservative Prime Minister, stood at a natural gas terminal near Aberdeen and made a pledge to “max out” oil and gas reserves in the North Sea with a new round of drilling. No wonder the Offshore Europe conference attendees were partying. Scientists promptly criticized Sunak’s decision as catastrophic for climate change. Others pointed out that Sunak made his pledge in the middle of a global heat wave.

The next day, the kids and I were in desperate need of a castle. Fortunately, there was a spectacular one nearby – Dunnottar Castle. We arrived on a foggy morning. The castle is perched on a spit of land surrounded on three sides by the North Sea. The only approach is steeply downhill to a neck of land, then uphill to an intimidating wall and a solitary door. The fog gave the whole scene a spooky, ethereal feel. Dunnottar certainly has its ghosts. In 900 AD, the King of Alba, Donald II, was killed at Dunnottar



Dunnottar Castle

while fighting a party of vikings, possibly under the command of the King of Norway. Was Rollo part of the raid? The dates work. That would be an interesting twist! In 954, Donald’s son King Malcolm I was killed at Dunnottar. In 1297, rebel William Wallace used trickery to capture the castle where he imprisoned four thousand English soldiers before burning them alive. Not everyone had a bad time. King Edward III of England visited Dunnottar in 1336. Mary Queen of Scots visited twice, as did King James VI. In 1651, during the English Civil War, the Honours of Scotland – the royal crown, sword, and scepter – were hidden at Dunnottar to keep them out of the hands of Oliver Cromwell and the royal-hating English. Cromwell ordered the castle to be seized, but the Honours were gone, smuggled out, the story goes, in a bag of seaweed by a fisherman.

We had a grand time. Dunnottar is everything a ruined castle should be – stony buildings to explore, fortified defenses to contemplate, nooks and crannies to investigate, and stunning views from every window. I knew we were going to take lots of photos. I loved the modern touches too. The entrance booth is cleverly fitted into a sharp bend in a narrow passage that was originally designed to foil an attacking army. We spent a bunch of time exploring the elaborate defenses of

the gateway, impressed yet again by how much human ingenuity goes into fighting and killing. Following the entrance path through two defensive tunnels, we emerged to a tranquil, park-like setting full of gray structures and green lawns. In the bustle of the castle's long history, with its violent episodes and regal comings-and-goings, it was easy to overlook that a family called Dunnottar home. In 1359, William Keith, the chief of the Keith clan, married Margaret Fraser, a niece of Robert the Bruce, King of the Scots, and was granted Dunnottar and its fiefdom. The Keith family held Dunnottar for four hundred years, raising children, entertaining guests, celebrating weddings and victories. The Keiths were the hereditary Marshals of Scotland, tasked with protecting the King and his regalia. In the 1500s, they became earls, joining the Peerage, and embarked on an energetic program of construction. Unfortunately, George Keith, the 8th Earl, decided in 1715 to support the doomed Jacobite uprising against King George I of England, which resulted in the forfeiture of his titles, lands, and castles. Dunnottar passed through a series of neglectful owners over the next two centuries, falling into disrepair, before being restored and opened to the public by its current owner.



Pattern #3 (Dunnottar)



A room with a view

The kids and I separated to explore the castle at our own speed. I took a leisurely pace, content to wander wherever my curiosity led. My thoughts drifted. What is it about ruins? I've been fascinated all things ruined since age thirteen, when I went on a five-week road trip to Mexico that featured eye-popping Toltec, Olmec, and Mayan ruins, among others. They fired up an intellectual curiosity about history and cultures that has not lost an ounce of fervor in sixty years. Another big influence on my teenage self was a book my mother owned called *Pleasure of Ruins* by Rose Macaulay, an English travel writer. The book took readers on an inspiring tour of classical ruins around the world and featured stunning photographs. I wanted to see those places too! I also wanted to know their stories, who did what and why. At Dunnottar, for example, around 1600 AD a secret staircase was built that led to the bedchamber of the wife of the 5th Earl, George Keith, which was unusual for the time. Well, she used the staircase to conduct a long affair with another aristocrat and ultimately ran away with him, taking the bulk of her husband's fortune with her!

The next day, we traveled south to see the last castle of our trip – Stirling. First, we took a detour inland. My target was Dunkeld, a village on the Tay River and home to a famous medieval cathedral and monastery. It was the place where the genealogical watershed of Alba flowed into the family tributary I mentioned earlier: *Dunkeld Creek*. For me, the headwaters of *Dunkeld Creek* stretch back to Pictland, where a creek emerges in the 840s when Kenneth MacAlpin establishes the Kingdom of Alba. From there, the creek flows unbroken for nearly two hundred years until 1035 when King Malcolm II dies without sons. A new creek enters at this point. One of Malcolm’s daughters, Bethóc, married Crínán of Dunkeld and bore a son, Donnchad – known to us as Duncan. On the death of Malcolm II, he became King Duncan I – the founder of the House of Dunkeld which would rule Scotland until 1286. Duncan was the grandfather of King David I, who we met in Edinburgh, and thus my ancestor. That’s why we detoured to Dunkeld.

The sun came out as we approached. We had a mid-afternoon appointment at Stirling Castle, an hour away, which didn’t give us much time in town. We hustled to the cathedral for photos. Standing in the aisle with the kids, I tried to quickly explain why we were here. King David I of Scotland had a son, Prince Henry Dunkeld, who married Ada de Warenne in 1139. Ada was the youngest of fourteen children borne by her mother, Elizabeth, via two marriages. Fourteen! Ada’s father was handsome William de Warenne, Earl of Surrey. Rumor was that he seduced Elizabeth while she was still married to her elderly husband, Robert de Beaumont, who subsequently died of a broken heart. William’s father fought at the Battle of Hastings alongside William the Conqueror. Prince Henry of Scotland nearly died early in 1139 when he rode too close to Ludlow Castle, which was under siege by King Stephen of England. He was caught by a grappling hook thrown from a castle battlement, dragging him from his horse. Henry was saved by King Stephen himself, who rode up and won a tug-of-war with the hook. After Henry and Ada were married they had to dodge an ambush on the road home organized by the jealous Earl of Chester, who apparently had murder on his mind. Despite surviving all these travails Henry never became King of Scotland. He died in 1152 after a prolonged and mysterious illness that might have been cancer, though there were rumors he had been poisoned. Fortunately for Scotland (and us) he and Ada had five children. The two eldest sons, Malcolm and William, became kings.



Dunkeld Cathedral



Restored royal room

By the time we reached Stirling Castle the day had grown hot. The parking lot was full, so we found a spot in town and then hiked steeply uphill to the castle. It proved to be a little too much for Olivia. She felt overheated and dehydrated, so we took a break in a grassy area near the entrance while I ran back to the car for Advil and Sterling fetched water. On my return, we released him to wander off and take photos while I sat in the shade of the castle with Olivia. It reminded me of our trip to Prague in 2019 with Gen, when the three of us sat in the shade of the city's huge cathedral on an equally warm day enjoying a quiet moment together in a beautiful place. Olivia recovered quickly and we dispersed into the castle

grounds. I had lowered my expectations for Stirling, thinking it would be a

reprise of the stately but lackluster Edinburgh Castle. The seat of the Scottish monarchy for centuries, Stirling Castle is large, intact, occupied, and neat as a pin. Queen Elizabeth II of England visited several times to inspect troops as part of her duties as the ruling monarch of Scotland. My low expectations were unwarranted. Stirling was a lovely edifice, full of stylish rooms, and homey open spaces. A royal suite had been restored to its 15th century opulence. Each royal room was inhabited by volunteers dressed in period costumes who cheerfully answered questions from inquisitive tourists. One young woman sang for us in the Queen's chamber. The whole experience was lovely. The kids felt the same way and we kept wandering around the castle until closing time. Stirling was the center of attention for important parts of Scottish medieval history and various significant battlefields could be spied from its lofty ramparts. But I was worn out from history. I was happy with textures and fresh air – and spending time with my children.

The next day was our last, alas. It was also my birthday. My hope was that we could return to Edinburgh for a celebratory pint and sticky toffee pudding at an historic pub that I had spied during our earlier visit. Fortunately, the travel gods smiled – the weather was warm and sunny, and the complicated logistics of returning the rental car (with no damage!), then walking to our airport hotel, and then getting downtown all went smoothly. It helped that Sterling and Olivia are such good travelers – and such good people. I loved spending two weeks with them, not just as a dad



Pattern #4 (Stirling)

but also as a fellow traveler. They were great company, fun, cheerful, interesting, and more than willing to roll with dad's 'let's-see-another-castle!' ambitions. Travel is stressful, especially the way I do it. I always have a big agenda with lots of places to see, miles to cover, and as much history to discover as possible. Living out of a suitcase for two weeks is hard enough, but I also kept us on the move. It's been that way forever for us as a family. Gen was always game and the kids grew up with dad hustling everyone out the door for the next destination. Nothing has changed, except we didn't have mom. That was hard, but it was another reason to travel together again – to explore the world now as a threesome. We did great. Our trip together to Alba was the best birthday present I've ever had.

I couldn't wait until our next adventure.



My birthday present



2024

The Streets of Pompeii

The plane banked and then I saw it – Mount Vesuvius.

I stifled a gasp. I’ve wanted to see the famous volcano since I was a kid, and there it was drifting serenely past as the plane maneuvered its way to a landing in Naples, Italy, on a mid-April afternoon. I hadn’t expected to see the iconic landmark. The forecast called for rain and the plane had been stuck in clouds for a while. Suddenly, they disappeared, revealing a magnificent view of green-clad Vesuvius lording over the land. As I pulled out my phone for a photo, I gave thanks to the travel gods for their unexpected act of kindness. Actually, they had been benevolent on the entire journey, teasing me only during the layover in Paris when, after following a tortured route



Mount Vesuvius

to my departure terminal that involved two buses, five escalators, and long, empty halls, my boarding pass failed at a checkpoint, causing a conference of officials. Now, I was gawking at Vesuvius! I happily joined a long line of admirers. From the Renaissance on, the volcano has inspired scientists, philosophers, poets, painters, writers, and, of course, tourists. Among its visitors was a young Mozart, on a tour of Italy with his father Leopold (perhaps inspired by his visit, Vesuvius gets a role in Mozart’s late opera *La Clemenza di Tito*). Other famous sightseers include Johann Goethe, Lord Byron, Percy and Mary Shelley, Andy Warhol, and Hans Christian Andersen who witnessed an eruption in 1834.

After landing, I made my way to a restaurant at the front of the airport where I ordered a celebratory cup of cappuccino. I was in Naples! I’d never been south of Rome before, latitudinally, in the whole Mediterranean Basin. It was more *terra incognita*, only this time with a dozing volcano nearby. It was a great way to start the next phase of my Sagalands adventure. Better yet, one of my children would be joining me. When I began planning the six-day trip, I called Sterling to see if he wanted to go. Inspired by a family outing to Rome when he and Olivia were eleven, Sterling caught the Roman history bug, bad. I did too and together we became Rome nerds (I read Livy for fun). When I said we would spend two days in Pompeii, he said “yes!” (Olivia couldn’t take the time off from her job, alas). Naples, Pompeii, Herculaneum, Vesuvius, and great pizza. Yay!



Selfie with cappuccino

I ordered another cappuccino while I waited for Sterling's plane to arrive from London. I didn't expect to be here, frankly. I never pegged Italy to be a destination for my Sagalands travels since I hadn't uncovered any evidence that it belonged in my *de Lacy* family watershed. However, that changed over the winter when I decided to take a spit test. Curious what my DNA might reveal about my heritage, I signed up with 23&Me, a popular biotech company that provides ancestry, health, and other genetic data. All I needed to do is spit in a tube (and pay a fee). My results were intriguing. I'm 99% Northwestern European. The other 1%? *Italian*. That was a surprise. Breaking down the NW Europe: I'm 91% British Isles; 1% Scandinavian; 1% French and German; and 6% undefined Northwest Europe. Including what I know of my mother's ancestry, that fit my research! I'll deem the Scandinavian part to be the viking Rollo. I'll consider the 1% French and German to be Charlemagne, King of the Franks, via his direct descendants Judith of Flanders and her great-great-great-great-granddaughter Matilda, the wife of William the Conqueror. Their son Henry I of England is my ancestor (and possibly yours if you have ancestral roots in the British Isles). The link to Charlemagne wasn't a surprise. He sired twenty children, mostly illegitimate, and research shows that nearly everyone with European ancestry can trace a family branch back to the amorous monarch.

There was more. Within the British Isles, the DNA analysis zeroed in geographically on southern Wales, England's Welsh border counties, Ireland, and the lowlands and southern uplands of Scotland. That fits my research. Walter de Lacy, who fought at the Battle of Hastings with his brother Gilbert, became an important Marcher Lord on the Welsh border. His descendants, as well as other ancestors of mine, led the Norman invasion of Ireland in the late 1100s. I call this branch *Walter Creek* and plan to explore it in future travels. The *de Lacy River* itself follows his brother Gilbert to northern England, where the de Lacys become major landowners and political players. John de Lacy was one of twenty-five barons who pledged to hold odious King John accountable for the *Magna Carta*. Yorkshire, Cheshire, and northern Wales were major Sagalands destinations. I've already covered Scotland. For my purposes it was the 1% French and German ancestry that I planned to explore next. When the western Roman Empire collapsed, Germanic-speaking peoples, including Franks, moved in, occupying an area from the Netherlands to Austria. Three centuries later, Charlemagne conquered most of Europe, including northern Italy. In 800 AD had himself crowned as the first Holy Roman Emperor. The mysterious 1% Italian connection, however, gnawed at me – until it gave me an idea. I'd go see Naples and Pompeii!

Sterling arrived on time and after hugs we caught a bus to the Garibaldi depot downtown. We clacked our bags down Umberto Corso boulevard to our third-floor B&B. The only hitch was a baffling keypad mechanism that kept us on the street for ten frustrating minutes. The next morning, we stepped outside to a full blast of Naples. The frenzied traffic and the constant car honking immediately stirred us to vigilance as we worked our way on foot to Piazza Bellini to meet a tour guide. We were in Centro Storico, the heart of old Naples, and walked along the crowded and narrow Via Tribunales, a principal road. In most European cities, it would have been pedestrian-only. Not here. Amid the crush of people, including swarms of school kids, vehicles and impatient courier dudes on noisy motorbikes kept shoving their way along the crowded road. The chaos was a shock at first, then it made sense. Naples is vividly alive. There were clothes hanging from lines stretched across the streets, trash everywhere including piles of bags on street corners, flags flying – mostly for the Napoli football team – tons of colorful graffiti, loud voices and music, delicious smells, and, of course, a pizzeria every two hundred yards or so. We loved it. My trusty guidebook tried to warn us, calling Naples “gritty” – likely earning a rude hand gesture from its citizens. It was a far cry from Copenhagen and Edinburgh, but that’s the beauty of travel. Naples knocked us off our comfortable tourist pedestal, which was great.



Via Tribunales in Naples

We met our guide, Livio, at a statue. Recalling my solo wanderings around Scandinavian cities, I decided to enlist the help of professionals this time (in the 1990s I worked part-time as a tour guide in Santa Fe). Livio was local and talked with his hands. We began at the Greek ruins in



Livio and ever-present graffiti

the piazza. Naples was founded in the 6th century BC as a Greek colony called *Neopolis*, making it one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world – which might partly explain its modern chaotic vitality. Livio, who spoke rapidly, ran us through the highlights of Naples’ history as we walked. The city has been a melting pot since antiquity and is proud of its diversity, he said. It is also proud of its religious fervor. In addition to countless churches, Naples boasts fifty-two patron saints, one for every type of adversity a city might endure. Livio said Naples lives daily in the shadow of death – meaning Mt. Vesuvius, which scientists say is overdue

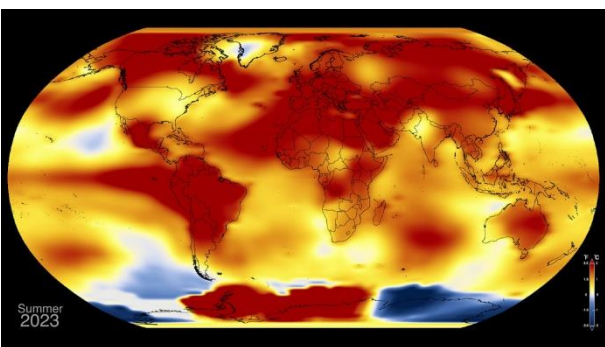
for an eruption. It contributes to the ‘live-for-the-moment’ nature of the city, he told us. The religious fervor, by the way, extends to Diego Maradona, the famous soccer star who played for Naples in the 1980s and continues to be worshipped as a saint in the city, as we saw everywhere.

Vesuvius isn’t the only mortal threat. Climate change is increasingly a deadly challenge to life in Italy. A record-breaking heatwave in July 2023 placed twenty-three cities under red alerts (meaning a risk of death), including Naples. The Italian media called it the “settimana infernale” – *the week of hell*. It was followed in August by a heatwave so hot and thick with humidity that it was named *Nero*, after a cruel and tyrannical Roman emperor. Italy also suffers from more frequent

drouths and intense flooding, impacting food production, hydropower, and causing damage to buildings and streets. I was tempted to ask Livio if there was a patron saint for climate change. I wasn’t being cheeky. NASA declared Summer 2023 to be Earth’s hottest since record keeping began in 1880. The amount of heat exceeded predictions of climate scientists, confounding them. The record heat

continues. March 2024 saw the tenth consecutive monthly record for higher temperatures globally. Against this backdrop, I can certainly understand the Italian live-for-the-moment attitude!

In the evening, we took another tour – this time to eat street food. Naples is famous as the birthplace of pizza, but many may not know it was originally poor people food, made on the streets. It didn’t become a kitchen dish until the 16th century when Spanish nobles (Naples was part of the Spanish Empire for two hundred years) introduced an exotic New World crop – the tomato. That’s when pizza became *pizza*. Later, it conquered the world with the help of American GIs returning from Italy at the end of WWII who started pizzerias back home. Our street food tour included regular pizza, fried pizza, fried pasta (my favorite), lemoncello liqueur, and two types of desserts. It was heaven. Our young guide, Sara, handled the large, international group with practiced ease. Afterward, Sterling and I wandered around Centro Storico for an hour, digesting and enjoying the nonstop energy of Naples.



Sterling sampling fried pizza



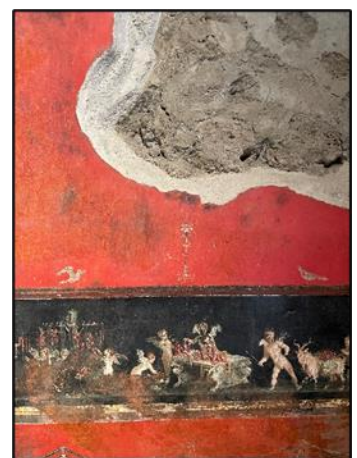
The next day we went to Pompeii. After making a rookie mistake involving a wrong train, we arrived at the famous city in time to meet our guide, Dario, an archaeologist. I hired him for a full day of touring, split between Pompeii and Herculaneum, to introduce us to the many wonders and complexities that awaited. I knew it was a two-part story. The first part is the famous one: how Mt. Vesuvius caught residents by surprise when it erupted in the fall of 79 AD, burying the cities with ash and pumice over two days and killing thousands of people. Both cities were frozen in time at the height of the Roman Empire. Eventually, both disappeared, literally and historically. Their accidental rediscovery in the mid-18th century, began the second story. In 1763, excavators found an inscription *Rei Publicae Pompeianorum* – and Pompeii was reborn. Archaeologists have been methodically exposing the city since the 1860s. It's a huge job – Pompeii's population at the time of the eruption was roughly twenty thousand people. It's also a huge maintenance headache, as Dario explained. Also, a huge delight! Just before our visit, officials unveiled a two thousand year-old dining room covered in frescoes, making front-page news worldwide.



Visitors in bathhouse

We joined a throng of visitors at the entrance and then followed Dario into an intact Roman bathhouse. My jaw hit the tiled floor. You could practically hear the water running and feel steam rising, the place was so well-preserved. I've seen a lot of ruins over the years, but nothing like this. I stared so much, Dario stopped talking and asked if I was listening to him. Our next stop was the open-air Forum, the heart of the city, where we could see Mt. Vesuvius looming nearby. Dario said some of the buildings were reconstructed both recently and in antiquity. After a major earthquake in 62 AD, the city was rebuilding when Vesuvius went off. Its rediscovery in the 18th century led to decades of royal looting as kings and princes filled their palaces and gardens with

Roman statues. During WWII, the Allies dropped bombs on Pompeii in the mistaken belief the Nazis were hiding ammunition in the ruins. Neglect caused the collapse of a Pompeiian house in 2010 that shamed Italian authorities. Today, the blows come from climate change – and tourists. Most of the nearly six hundred excavated buildings are roofless, exposing the walls and frescoes to erosive power of increasingly bigger storms. New technology is being employed, Dario told us, including thermal imaging cameras and



A beautiful, exposed fresco

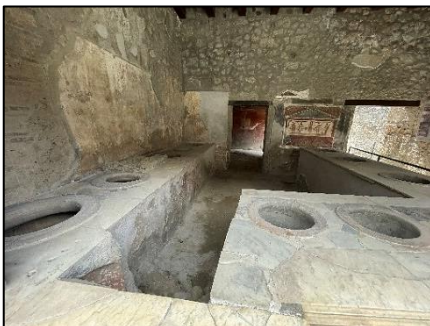
drones to alert staff to maintenance problems, but the task is overwhelming. The other threat are tourists wearing backpacks who scrape unprotected frescoes as they turn to take pictures, he warned, eyeing my backpack and water bottles. Duly noted.

Dario led us through some of the many highlights of Pompeii, including the famous House of the Faun and the lovely House of the Vetti Brothers, owned by the richest citizens in the city. He emphasized that although the destruction of Pompeii froze the city in time, painting a vivid picture of life – especially of the wealthy – at the height of Roman civilization, many people don't know that Pompeii started life as a Greek colony. Located on the Sarno River, the city became a commercial hub for trade routes north to Naples and south to the 'boot' of the peninsula. It was a typical – i.e., unremarkable – city for its day, Dario said, and would have slipped into oblivion if not for a certain cataclysmic event. Pompeii died in a heartbeat. Archaeologists found bowls and plates sitting on snack bar counters, bread baking in ovens, food ready-to-eat on tables – and people huddled in corners of rooms where they died. The macabre side of the calamity, including the plaster casts of dead people, has long dominated the popular image of the tragedy, but many scholars now believe the majority of the population managed to escape during the early stages of the eruption. It's what they left behind that matters, especially the homes of the ultra-rich with their magnificent frescoes and over-the-top opulence. Naturally, the experience of their slaves was vastly different. Archaeologists recently discovered a single-room bakery/prison where slaves and donkeys worked, lived, and slept together in brutal conditions, including near darkness.



Ceramic pipe in a wall

The opulence was impressive, but what really caught our eye were the mundane, everyday parts of life in Pompeii – the ceramic water pipes exposed in walls, the stone sills for missing storefront doors, the water fountains at street corners where you



A 2000-year old snack bar

can fill up a bottle (very cool!), the square shut-off valves that looked totally modern, and bakeries with their grinding stones. I loved the snack bars. Called *thermopolia* ('hot food') they are located at street junctions, often across from one another. It was easy to imagine their proprietors yelling to customers "My snail and fish stew is the best! Not his over there!"

Most of all, we loved Pompeii's streets. Sunken, lined with uneven paving stones, rutted by countless donkey carts, flanked by sidewalks, and crossed at intervals by blocks of stone, all of the streets were mesmerizing. You could almost hear the loud creak of the cart wheels and the curses of the donkey driver or imagine a fine-dressed matron lifting her stola as she stepped on the large crossing blocks to avoid staining her garment with the water and effluent flowing down the street. The streets were both functional and lovely to look at – i.e., very *Roman*. Sterling said they reminded him of the Pont du Gard, a famous aqueduct in France that is an engineering and aesthetic marvel, which we saw on a family trip. Some of Pompeii's streets



Pompeii street

were wide, some narrow, some pedestrian-only, and some one-way. The main streets were wide enough for two carts to pass each other, while others were essentially alleys. All were mysterious and enchanting. Where did they go? What was around the next corner? Most were lined with shops. They immediately recalled the streets we saw in Naples with its stores, pizza bakeries, and fast food joints. The continuity was striking. There is something timeless about a street. The earliest globally date back six thousand years and were a foundational part of the emergence a radical new idea in human history at the time: *the city*. While cities have changed dramatically, the purpose of streets hasn't really. I love these deep connections. That's why I kept lingering outside the fancy homes, to Dario's bemusement.

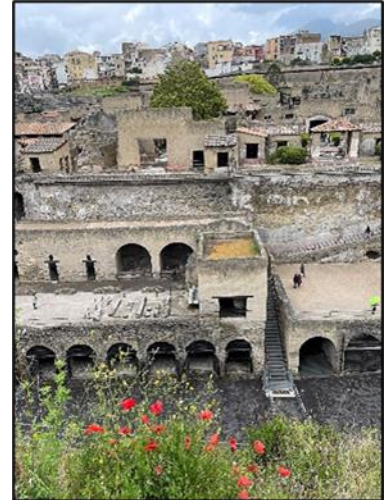


Naples

After lunch, we traveled to Herculaneum, a port that was also wiped out by Vesuvius. It was a different experience. Compact and surrounded on three sides by a modern city, Herculaneum has a 'hole-in-the-ground' feel that makes it more museum-like. It complements Pompeii by having better preserved second-story architecture and, I thought, more interesting tile flooring. Its story is more tragic too. Spared the suffocating rain of ash and pumice by favorable winds early in the eruption, some of its citizens tarried too long, only to die horrifically when boiling-hot pyroclastic gases swept down from the volcano. Hundreds of bodies were found in bathhouses at the water's edge, apparently waiting for rescue.

Dario took us to one of the highlights of Herculaneum, the Villa of the Papyri, which had recently been in the news. A luxurious residence constructed on terraces overlooking the sea, the

villa likely belonged to Lucius Calpurnius Piso, a Roman senator, consul, and father-in-law to one Julius Caesar. Its name derives from a spectacular discovery made in the 1750s during a hunt for Roman treasures to fill the palace of King Charles II of Naples. In a library, workers came across more than a thousand baked and blackened papyrus scrolls, in what is still the largest collection of Graeco-Roman books ever found. Their existence fired up the Romantic minds of Europe, who hoped the library contained lost Greek plays or ancient histories. Early efforts to unroll the fragile papyri revealed books of philosophy, not plays, but also destroyed them in the process. Modern X-ray and CT scans allow researchers to peer “inside” the scrolls but not determine their contents. In 2021, a group of Artificial Intelligence experts came together to see if they could find answers. Calling themselves the Vesuvius Challenge, they managed to digitally ‘unroll’ some of the papyri, detecting ink-based letters – and more philosophy. Although they didn’t find a lost play, their work was considered a big victory for AI, potentially opening new doors into the classical world.



Herculaneum

Silver linings to a story of tragedy and death.



You can walk on the floors!

Sterling and I eagerly returned to Pompeii for another full day of exploring and gawking. He was as enchanted by the city as I was, especially by the streets, and was equally amazed at the freedom we had to roam. We could walk on 2000-year old tile floors, which was pretty incredible. On the train ride, we reminisced about a board game called *Pompeii* that was a favorite of ours when he was a kid. The mission: get your team of citizens out of the city before the volcano erupts! The memory caused a pang in my heart. I loved raised kids. It filled me with purpose and great joy, especially in the early years when we traveled often to ranches and national parks, back when everything was new again. Entering Pompeii, we agreed to split up and explore on our own. Sterling wanted to prospect for photographs. He had become quite the shutterbug in the past year, with a backpack full of lenses. He was even contemplating buying a

35mm analog camera. I had to smile. When I was his age, I caught the same camera bug. I guess what they say about apples not rolling far from trees is true!

After parting ways in the Forum, I headed east toward a quadrant of the city that I had not seen yet. Passing more houses, bakeries, snack bars, fountains, and enticing streets, the thrill I felt yesterday quickly returned. That's the thing about Pompeii – it's *palpable*. It's real. You feel it with all senses at once, including the aroma of the flowers in bloom. Its palpability is impossible to capture with words or photographs, though I took plenty. You have to be there to experience the full effect, feel the paving stones under your feet, stand in the center of a silent amphitheater, walk through a bathing complex, contemplate a child's tiny, windowless bedroom. And that's only the part we can see. Nearly a third of the city remains unexcavated. What's still hiding? Pompeii satisfied an additional sense for me – a deep need to seek and find. I've been a seeker since I can remember. Choose whatever word fits best: curiosity, restlessness, risk-taking, questing, wanderlust, a desire to know, a need to discover. It might be a genetic thing. Some years ago, the gene DRD4-7R made headlines when it was scientifically associated with a predisposition for novelty-seeking and risk-taking, sometimes leading to addiction (the gene is linked to dopamine, a hormone that triggers strong feelings of pleasure). The media immediately declared it the 'travel gene' and ran stories about people who were born to roam. Researchers were more cautious, noting that novelty-seeking is a complex behavior with many potential sources and influences. My DNA spit test didn't say if I had the 'travel gene' or not, but I wonder.



Unexcavated Pompeii

It was on my mind this winter. It had been another dreary one. I missed Gen, though time had dulled the ache as memories began to fade a bit. Soloness was no longer a novelty. I had settled into a routine that kept me busy, though the specter of loneliness kept making an appearance. I'll admit that I rummaged around some online dating sites for seniors (I hate the word "senior" which is a stand-in for "old" and not how I feel), but they weren't for me. It wasn't clear what I wanted from them anyway. Not another relationship. I valued my independence too much now. No, other things drearied me through the long winter months. One was my day job. Although I called it a career in 2022, I had an ongoing contract with Paul Hawken, a prominent author and climate activist to write and edit hopeful climate solutions for his organization's web site. It was good,

thoughtful work. It paid well and I liked the people involved, especially the young writers that I supervised. I loved their upbeat energy and I looked forward to our biweekly Zoom calls. As the winter wore on, however, I began to feel adrift despite the urgency of our work. News headlines weren't helping, particularly the ones about the worsening effects of climate change as humans continued to heat the planet calamitously. My spirits sagged. Good days (work) were followed by bad ones (news) until they became mashed up together, creating a lethargy that was unfamiliar to me. I snapped out of it one night in March while watching a pirate movie. The brave and reckless pirate captain had steered his ship and crew into a hurricane to avoid capture and nearly drowned everyone as a result. Emerging from the storm, the winds died, stranding them in the open sea, in peril again. A subtitle appeared on the screen announcing their predicament. *The Doldrums*, it said. A light went off. That was me – boat, crew, and captain. I was stuck in the Doldrums. I turned the movie off, thinking. The next day, I called a real estate agent I knew.

I had decided to sell my house and quit my day job.

After an hour or so of wandering, I found myself in the middle of Pompeii's amphitheater. It was no Colosseum, but it had a serenity to its modest scale that made it feel more human, like going to a football game at a mid-sized university. Looks are deceiving, however. This was a house of killing, the earliest known stage for gladiatorial combat in the Roman world. Twenty thousand

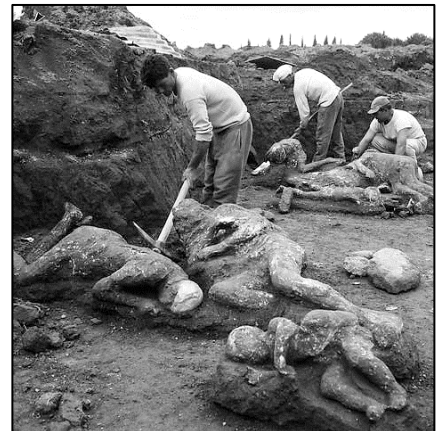


spectators watched the bloodlust. Things could get out of hand. In 59 AD a deadly fight broke out between Pompeians and fans from rival Nocera that began with taunts at the games, escalated to stone-throwing and flowed into the street where swords were drawn and blood spilled, suggesting that Italians have been taking their sports seriously for two thousand years! I snapped a photo and kept going.

The decision to sell the house triggered a process of cleaning and tossing out that grew into something like a purge. Days before flying to Naples, I hauled six cargo van loads of accumulated household belongings to the dump. I had lived the house for twenty years, the longest stretch by

far of any residence in my life. The kids were four when we moved in. Gen and I were forty-two. Sterling and Olivia grew up there, moved away, came back for the pandemic, moved away again. Every part of the house held evidence of our lives, including bric-a-brac I had not seen in years. It tugged hard at my heart. Three years after moving in, Gen was diagnosed with cancer. I found medical files in drawer after drawer. The house spanned our entire medical odyssey together. It is where she died as I held her hand. Emptying the large garage was the hardest of all. The entire span of our lives were there, high school mementos, old furniture, tubs of Halloween and Christmas regalia, piles of books, class notes from Reed and graduate school, detritus from our carefree years in Los Angeles, stuff from my childhood, my mother's old electric typewriter, on and on. I threw a lot of it out, including the hopes and plans from the early days of the Quivira Coalition. Nobody wanted it. I did, but I needed to close doors and hatches. Put fresh wind in my sails.

I headed west from the amphitheater, walking through the Palaestra, a large, open area that served as a gymnasium, slave market, and military camp. It was very square, with sharp corners. The Romans loved things with corners – rooms, city blocks, interior patios, palaces, forts. I turned left onto a narrow street and entered an orchard. It was time to see dead people. In 1863, Italian archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli came up with the innovative idea of pouring a mixture of plaster, lime, and water into hollow cavities that his workers discovered while digging. The resulting casts, which included humans, animals, clothing, food, and plants, captured the tragic last moments of the city powerfully and indelibly. I found a cluster of bodies in a glass shed at the end of the orchard. It was as far as they got. The agony they felt as they died was obvious to see, and heart-rending. I know it's a cliché but standing there reminded me that our journey through life is brief. Sooner or later, it has an end point, though hopefully not a violent one! It was another reason to leave the Doldrums. I needed to shake up my life and move on, literally. Fortunately, after deciding to sell the house, I quickly found a house to rent in Santa Fe, close to fun things, for a year or two. After that, who knows.



Plaster casts of dead Pompeiians

Leaving the orchard, I headed for a water fountain that I knew on a main thoroughfare. Reaching it, I was quickly reminded that Pompeii is the second-most popular archaeological site in the world (after the Colosseum in Rome), with nearly three million visitors a year. I had been



Water fountain and street

wandering in the quiet neighborhoods of the city, which I mostly had to myself. The thoroughfare, however, flowed with people, including groups of tourists and schoolkids. After refilling my water bottles, I pulled off my backpack and sat down on a 2000-year old bench outside someone's home. According to the UN, tourism levels globally in 2024 are expected to return to pre-pandemic numbers – roughly 1.4 billion arrivals. Europe remains the most popular destination. Italy is projected to endure 266 million overnight guests. I watched the flow of people in the street. Not long ago, I would have attached greenhouse gas emission numbers to the tourism industry when discussing it. However, shortly after I decided to sell my house, I gave notice to Paul Hawken that April 30th would be my

last day on the job. What I didn't tell him, I'll say here: no more greenhouse gas numbers. Ever. I'm not turning away from the crisis, just the numbers. I know what they mean and watching their relentless rise had been a big source of my Doldrums.

I packed up my things, rose from the bench, and made my way up an unpretentious street nearby. There weren't any famous houses, temples, baths, or public buildings along its length, just more shops, bakeries, and unnamed domiciles. There weren't any tourists either, just me. The street had ruts, though. I love Pompeii's ruts, worn into the hard stone by the iron-clad wheels of countless carts and wagons over countless years. Touching the ruts is amazing. You feel their smoothness, trace their edges, and follow them like a detective. The cart ride must have been bumpy for the driver (a slave) and his goods. And noisy with the yelling and creaking. Smelly too. That's why the streets had stepping stones!



Pompeii street with ruts

After lunch, Sterling and I visited another ultra-elite home – the Villa of the Mysteries. To get there, we had to exit through a city gate and walk along the Via Delle Tombe, so-called because it is lined with tombs of wealthy Pompeiians. Soon, we entered the magnificent villa, one of the best-preserved in the region. Its most famous feature is a dining room filled with frescoes depicting what appears to be the initiation rites of a girl into a mystery cult of Dionysus. Despite a century of debate, no one really knows for sure what they represent. It recalled a book I read in the 1980s called the *Motel of the Mysteries* about an archaeological dig in the ancient land of Usa, which was

buried by a cataclysmic air pollution event in 1985 AD. The archaeologists believe they have found a religious temple but are stumped by the number “26” on a door. Entering the room, they find a body in a ceremonial bed facing a square box on a table, which they assume is a holy altar. In an adjoining space, which they think is the Inner Sanctum, they discover a body lying in a porcelain sarcophagus. The archaeologists are completely baffled.

As Sterling and I headed toward Pompeii’s exit at the end of the day, we decided to return the next morning for another day of exploring. Sterling didn’t need any convincing. He continued to be as awestruck by Pompeii as I. We decided to make it a half-day. At the train depot, I purchased tickets for a ride to a parking lot near the top of Mt. Vesuvius, which we would “climb” (walk) in the afternoon, capping off our sojourn to Italy. We loved the train depot, by the way. Its peeling paint and run-down condition not only captured an essence of the region, the graffiti on its walls echoed all the scribblings we saw in Pompeii itself. Some things never change, which was fine with us.



Sterling at the train depot



The Greek-style theater

The next morning, we split up and headed out to unreconnoitered parts of the city. I beelined for the theater district, which held a large, open-air theater of Greek design that could hold five thousand spectators, and an adjacent smaller, roofed theater apparently used for musical events. Entering the large theater from the top, I sat down in the nosebleed seats, which the Romans called “up with the gods.” Good for them. I watched workers assemble a wooden stage for an upcoming public concert. That’s another thing I love about European countries, they’ll use a 2000-year old historic monument for a musical event because that’s what they are for. Past and present blending in practical and harmonious ways. It reminded me of a trip to France, where Gen and I visited an amazingly intact Roman

theater in Orange which was also being set up for a musical event. At the top of the theater’s tall backwall you could still see the burned stone from a fire set by attacking “barbarians” in the 5th century!

As I wandered, my thoughts turned to Gen. She would have loved Pompeii for exactly the same reasons that Sterling and I did. He and I joked, however, that she would have seen a lot less of it. When visiting museums or historical sites, Gen took her time to absorb as much detail as possible which often slowed her pace down to a crawl. I'm much speedier. We learned early in our relationship to split up as soon as we entered a museum or ruin and meet later. Occasionally, I needed to be creative. At a Roman site in Nice, France, Gen tarried so long that I took the kids outside to watch a group of locals play boules, which I'd never seen before. Sitting under the sheltering cover of tall trees, we struggled to figure out the game's rules mostly because the players spent so much time arguing! Although memories were beginning to fade, they still caused a pang in my heart. The visit to the Roman theater in Orange was part of memorable sojourn to Provence that Gen and I did in 2014. We didn't know at the time, but it would be the last romantic trip we'd take together before financial debt and cancer treatments swamped our lives.

Selling the house and moving on meant sailing away from Gen. I felt ready. It had been a year-and-a-half since her death – long enough to feel like it belonged in the past, not the present. I spent some of this time consolidating her things, which helped. In the process, I found various journals. Gen kept a journal, off and on, for a long time, though I didn't realize they extended back to our freshman year at Reed. I read through them slowly, glad to hear her voice again and share her hopes and struggles once more. I didn't find any secrets. Not that I expected to. As with any relationship, especially a long one like ours, there were low moments to go with the high and happy ones, particularly in our early, youthful years, but we talked through them together and forged on. The last ten years of her journals were dominated by cancer. Despite her public-facing stoicism, I knew the cancer fight made her privately unhappy. The need for top-notch health insurance that would cover the specialists at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles forced Gen to take a state job that she didn't like very much. It was a no-win situation she came to resent. I knew all this, though not in the emotional detail that she reserved for her journals. Being a Midwesterner, Gen rarely talked about her feelings, hiding them behind her big smile and warm laugh. Grin and bear it was her *modus operandi*. I tried to draw her out occasionally, without success. I even suggested therapy once, to no avail. That made reading her words both hard and heart-breaking.

Then there were the words that Gen didn't write. Or say. She stopped journaling after the heart surgery and held steadfastly to her *modus operandi* in public and private even after she had decided to stop all medical treatments. She knew she was dying but kept silent on the topic, sticking

to day-to-day subjects. That was her prerogative, of course. It was hard on me, however, especially as I began to administer the hospice. Her refusal to talk about dying meant I didn't know what she wanted or was thinking. That was just the practical stuff. There were also no 'goodbyes' or 'thank yous,' no squeeze of my hand, no sad smiles or tearful embraces, even at the very end. It wasn't deliberate, just a coping strategy on her part for what was happening. Still, it hurt. When I broke down in the car after the final visit her oncologist in Santa Fe, Gen didn't offer me any words of consolation. I tried to understand, but failed. Maybe she was in denial, or maybe she had pushed everything away. I don't know. But silence like that is brutal on a spouse. In the months following her death, I harbored a small hope that I would find a letter from her in a drawer or among the last pages of her journals, saying in words to me what she couldn't say aloud. We had been together forty years, raised two children, went on many wonderful adventures, and braved an intense sixteen-year cancer journey together. There was no letter. I knew she loved me, but the lack of farewells and kind words was really difficult to process. Among other things, I denied me closure. Goodbyes are essential. I had to say my mine alone. The hurt eased over time, but it also contributed to the Doldrums. It was another reason to sell the house and move on.

Finding myself back in Pompeii's Forum, I texted Sterling to see if he wanted to meet up or keep exploring. Keep exploring, he said. He was in a new part of the city and wanted to look around for photos. Not a problem. I was impressed by how much ground he was covering. He's definitely speedier than me. Partly it's his youthful energy, but a lot of it is his training. He and Olivia began traveling when they were three, so both of them grew up thinking strategically about destinations, how to navigate unfamiliar terrain, and problem-solve. Sterling took to it like a fish to water. Once when the kids were thirteen, Gen and I lingered too long at the top of a medieval castle admiring the view until Sterling warned us that the gates were about to close. On our visit



The Amazing Race duo

to Venice when he was eleven, Sterling led us around the dense city using a paper map. Like his dad, he has an innate sense of direction (Olivia, by her own admission, does not). We would have been a formidable *Amazing Race* team. We discovered the reality travel series in 2015 and watched every episode twice (at least I did). The winning duos, we observed, were not only strategic and physical – and lucky – they were also compatible and supportive. That's us. Maybe we'll still apply!

I needed coffee. After scoring a cappuccino, I stepped back into the streets of Pompeii and turned my thoughts to Italy and the Sagalands. Vikings raided the western coast of the peninsula but apparently never made an attempt at colonization. The Normans, however, conquered southern Italy, starting in 999 AD. Hired as mercenaries by feuding princes, Norman knights quickly took things into their own hands. Overthrowing the local nobility, Normans sank deep roots in Italian soil. They defeated armies sent by the Pope and others and kept conquering. By 1130, they had established the Kingdom of Sicily, which included the southern third of the peninsula, Malta, and bits of North Africa. Those Normans! This particular bunch were minor nobles from the Hauteville area in western Normandy. Like their royal kin, they had a big thirst for fighting and a talent for winning. The only relative of mine involved in the Italian conquest that I can determine was Ralph de Tosny, a noble forced into exile in 1015 by Duke Richard of Normandy (Tosnys were famously hot-headed) and went south to fight alongside his fellow Normans for glory and booty.

Sterling and I met up in time for lunch before catching our ride to the top of Mt. Vesuvius. We were a little sad to leave Pompeii. Despite all our time in the city, there was still so much more to see and explore. That's how travel goes, however. Get a taste of a place, or a feast in this case, and come back later for more. Sterling was already making plans to return to Naples and Pompeii with his friends, causing another pang in my heart. Ah, to be twenty-five again with horizons beckoning. A big difference today: the world is wired for travel now, which means the opportunities are extraordinary. So are the challenges. Heat waves, for instance. They change how you think about travel (or ought to, anyway), as well as when to go. They are another example of how the world has changed so stupendously since I was twenty-five. It means I'm at a loss for advice to give young people – not that they would listen to someone raised in the analog era! I do often offer two unsolicited tips to my kids: find a safe place to live with good friends; and go see as much of the world as possible. With the decision to sell the house and move into town, I chose to follow my own advice.

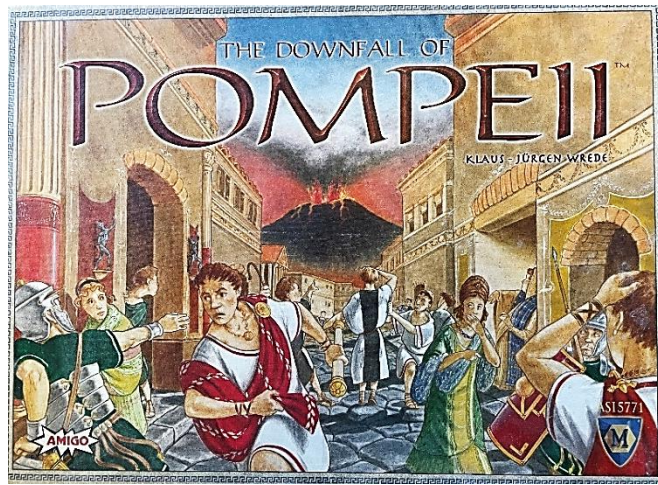
A few hours later, Sterling and I stood on the edge of Vesuvius' crater. The walk to the summit had been a bit anticlimatic after the hair-raising bus ride up the the narrow and very busy access road to a tiny, chaotic parking area. But here we were! The only sign of life was steam from a sulphur vent tucked under the lip of the volcano. It was hard to



The summit of Vesuvius

imagine the crater as a source of violent destruction and death, past or present. That's the thing about volcanoes, though, as the ancient Roman residents of the area could tell you. Turning, I could see Pompeii in the distance. It was a dark, circular void in a landscape densely packed with modern buildings. On our walk in Naples, Livio told us this part of Italy was packed with more people per square kilometer than anywhere else in the country, including Rome. It was easy to believe. For everyone's sake, I hope Vesuvius keeps snoozing. But I didn't want to think about it. I walked over to Sterling, who was busily snapping photos, and gave him a big hug. It was so good to travel with him. Olivia too. In two months, the three of us would be together again on the road, this time to the Low Countries, chasing an emperor.

More wind in our sails.



The board game



Francia

I completely forgot it was Father's Day.

Flying out of Santa Fe, I had braced myself for enduring more whims of the travel gods. Fortunately, I arrived in Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport on Sunday morning without any mishaps. The gods were either feeling kindly or else they partied too hard Saturday night and were sleeping it off. Olivia and Sterling were not so lucky, however. Olivia made it to Dublin but then had to kill



half a day when the airline cancelled her connecting flight without explanation. Sterling made it to the luggage carousel at Schiphol but then had to wait over an hour for his bags. Apparently, the luggage of every passenger on his flight was missing. That was a new one! He texted me cheery updates as I waited a hundred yards away. Finally, Olivia arrived, looking happy but weary. We gave ourselves a big three-way hug. It was so good to be traveling again with my children! Stepping outside to catch a bus downtown were greeted by sunshine, which was a surprise. It had been rainy all day and the forecast called for more during our stay. We took the opportunity for a family selfie. As we lined up, Olivia said “Happy Father's Day!”

Selfie with children

The bus deposited us near our hotel, located on a canal in a pretty area west of Amsterdam's Centrum district not far from the famous Anne Frank House. After dropping off our bags in the cozy room, we stepped outside. We were in Amsterdam! How cool was that? Very cool, I thought. We walked onto a bridge and immediately started taking photos. Olivia had made a lightning visit to the city during her semester in Berlin in 2019, but this was a first visit for Sterling and myself. We chose a direction randomly and began a slow ramble. I liked the city immediately. You hear so much about Amsterdam, about its beauty, its museums, its canals, its annual flood of tourists, its Red Light District, that I didn't know what to expect in real life. Would it be like Venice? The Italian city gets twenty million visitors a year and has struggled mightily to maintain its integrity. Amsterdam gets the same amount of people and has many of the same issues, though its “red light” reputation adds a burden of rowdiness and seediness that Venice happily lacks. One difference was clear right away. Amsterdam is a busy modern city with one million residents leading regular lives. Its vitality was easy to see – especially all the people going places on their bicycles!

On cue, we ran into a street party. Three, actually. Crossing a canal, we suddenly heard pop music. Following the sound, we entered a pedestrian-only street where we saw a crowd, a stage, and a band. The music was happy, the advertisements were in Dutch, the flags overhead were orange, and there was a beer in nearly everyone's hand. Locals, it had to be! Working our way around the crowd, we discovered another band a short distance down the street. Then another, though this band played what sounded like metal rock. It was really great. Everyone was having a good time, us included. Not wanting to leave, I asked Sterling and Olivia to wait. I wanted to soak up the music and the good feelings. I had designed this trip with fun in mind – as well as sailing to a new part of the Sagalands – and this was a great way to start.



Street party in Amsterdam

I needed it. Four weeks earlier, I had upended my life. Prepping for its sale, I emptied my house of its contents, hired a mover, and transferred myself to a rental house in town. For the first time in more than twenty years, I lived someplace new. On April 30th, I quit my day job. I filed for Gen's Social Security check the following day. There was more. In order to sell my house properly, it needed a substantial upgrade, including a new roof, a new walk-in shower, a new patio door, new windows, a complete stucco job on the outside, and a paint job inside. I found a wonderful contractor who engaged his whole family in the work. When he was done, I told him "I want to move into this house!" – which he appreciated. The house went on the market June 8th. My stress levels were high and unrelenting through the entire process, including countless trips back-and-forth trips between the houses, and runs to Home Depot. Then there was the cost. The repairs and upgrades set me back \$75,000 – the bulk of my savings (and I didn't have a job now). I was reassured by my real estate agent that I would get it back, but I crossed my fingers anyway. Then there were the memories. Sterling and Olivia came out before the move to pack up their things and make decisions about what they wanted to keep. It was also an opportunity to sleep in their rooms once more. One evening, we sat in the living room and had a long nostalgia session, recalling birthday parties, sleepovers, Halloweens, dogs, chickens, good times with mom, reciting lines from Shakespeare, holidays, and more. There were tears – but they were good tears. Everybody was ready for next stages of life, myself especially. The house move was hard and completely draining on every level. I was ready for street music in Amsterdam – and fun.

The next morning, we started with Van Gogh, whose paintings I've admired for decades. I know he wasn't the cheeriest person in the world, but his work has a zest for life that has always been inspiring. I love his colors and his brush-strokes, which I got to see up close! The museum had a special showing of self-portraits, of which Van Gogh painted thirty-six during his lifetime. In them, the artist comes across as intense and serious. I did a quick Internet search. As I suspected, Van Gogh never smiled in any of his portraits. That conformed to his personality, I guess, but it makes somewhat dour viewing. Fortunately, his outdoor paintings, especially the ones done in the lovely countryside near Arles, France, are full of life. They make you smile. When Gen and I visited Arles during our trip to Provence in 2014, we walked to places where Van Gogh had made some of his famous works, including the Night Café and Starry Night Over the Rhone. Unfortunately, when we stood on the spot by the river where he set up his easel, our view was obstructed by a cruise ship.



Next on the fun list was a street food walking tour Amsterdam's Jordaan district. Our guide, Aileen, who worked for the national train company, was cheery and personable. As we set out, she warned us that we would be sampling spicy food as part of Amsterdam's multicultural heritage. Aileen was East Asian Dutch. Her parents arrived from Indonesia when she was a child, she said. They represented the legacy of Dutch colonialism that began in 1602 with the founding of the Dutch East India Company, the world's first multinational corporation. Its chief business, Aileen told us, was importing exotic spices, including nutmeg, mace, cloves, cinnamon, and peppercorn. Each were highly coveted and highly profitable. The Company's huge success helped kick-off the Dutch Golden Age, a century-long period when commerce, science, and the arts famously blossomed. Later, as we walked, I asked her if the Dutch were owning up at all to the 'other side'



The cheese stop

of their colonial legacy – the slavery, exploitation, racism, and oppression. “No,” she replied with a noticeable sigh, “not really.” Formerly a working-class district for Amsterdam's port, the Jordaan has become a trendy and expensive neighborhood for professionals. We made six tasty stops for food, including curried chicken and pickled herring. I loved the cheese stop – I could eat Dutch cheese all day!

In the evening we made cocktails. I've never made one before, unless gin-and-tonics count, and I'm not a mixed drink connoisseur, preferring to stick with margaritas. However, I stumbled across a cocktail-making workshop at the House of Bols during my planning and thought it would be fun. Sterling and Olivia agreed. After checking in at the front desk, we headed downstairs for a required walk-through of the museum, an interactive, multi-sensory experience that we loved. The House of Bols is famous for its flavored liqueurs and *genever*, a type of upscale gin made only in the Low Countries (and protected by law). Founded in Amsterdam in 1575 by Pieter Bols, it is the oldest distillery in the world. Pieter's son, Lucas, put it on the map when he came a major shareholder in the Dutch East India Company with first rights to the spices as they arrived in port. He invented hundreds of tasty liqueurs – called 'elixirs' at the time – becoming rich and famous. In the museum, we tasted, sniffed, and touched our way through the distillery's many confections. Then we went upstairs for free drinks.



Elixirs at the House of Bols

Next up: the workshop. This was right up the kids' alley. Among other duties, Olivia is a barista at her bakery-café and is eager to learn how to make cocktails. Sterling was ready to drink



The happy workshopers

them. His (rich) friends in Portland were mixed drink buffs, which meant he knew his way around the cocktail world. Fifteen of us arranged ourselves around a U-shaped bar, ready to go. Under the upbeat guidance of a youthful instructor, we made two drinks: caipirinha, the national drink of Brazil (as Sterling knew); and a delicious passion-fruit martini with a regrettable name that has become popular (Olivia concurred that it needed a new name). The mixing process was a bit more complicated than I expected. In addition to measuring carefully, you had to get the ice element just right, and not get things out-of-order. It was a blast. Best of all, when we were done, we got to consume the fruit of labors.

The next day was intentionally unscheduled. The weather was good, so we decided to visit Utrecht, a lovely town close to Amsterdam, also full of canals. After arriving at Utrecht's train station, we headed for the Dom Tower, built in the 13th century and later attached to a big church dedicated to St. Martin. We decided to skip the guided tour to the top of the Dom, choosing instead

to wander through and around the church – where I was suddenly reminded of the main purpose of my trip. Unlike Amsterdam, Utrecht was built atop the remains of a Roman fort. In 50 AD, after a series of disastrous campaigns in Germania, the Roman Emperor Claudius decided the empire would make no further attempts to expand north. He ordered that a series of forts be constructed along the Rhine River to hold the imperial line (the river flowed through Utrecht back then). As we walked around the outside of the church, I noticed a metal map lodged in the stone pavement. It depicted the location of various Roman forts on the Rhine, including the one beneath our feet. Claudius' line held fast for two centuries, but repeated invasions by Germanic tribes, including a formidable foe called *the Franks*, forced the Romans to retreat in 275. Utrecht disappears from the historical record until 650, when Dagobert I, king of the Franks, orders a church to be built within the old Roman fort. Apparently, the city had become part of the growing Frankish empire. Nobody remembers king Dagobert today, but everyone knows his great-great-great-great-great grandson. That's why I was here.



Map of the Roman forts

To see an emperor.



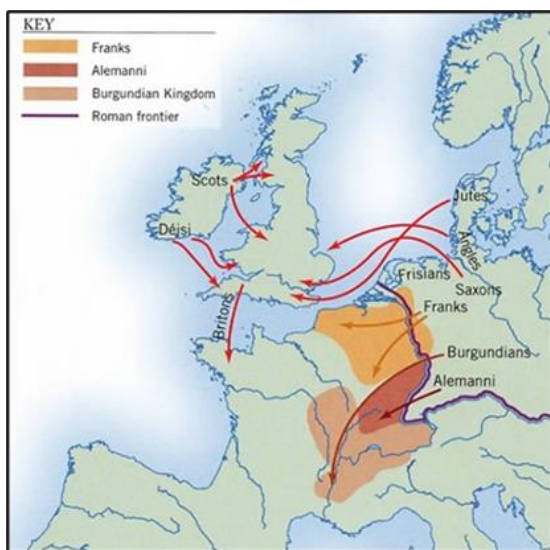
Emerging from Cologne's main train station, we were greeted with a sight I'll remember for a long time: the city's famous gothic cathedral. Huge and impossibly tall, its twin towers looked appeared to touch the sky. We stopped walking, and stared. It recalled a similar jaw-dropping moment in Rome when Sterling and Olivia were eleven. Emerging from a dark subway station, we were greeted by the Roman Colosseum – right there in front of us! Just across the street. It was the same in Cologne, except here a plaza separated us from the historical wonder, not a street. It was full of people too, mostly men, I noticed. As we stood gaping at the cathedral, I heard singing. Then I saw kilts. Kilts? Glancing over at the kids, I saw that Sterling was already on his phone making an inquiry. "It's the Euros. European Football Championship," he said. "Soccer," he added unnecessarily for Olivia. "Scotland is playing Switzerland tonight in Cologne stadium." Ah. That explained the kilts as well as the boisterous singing, though the numerous beer bottles in evidence were likely contributing. Curious about the kilts, which all had the same tartan colors, I made my

own inquiry, discovering they represented the Scottish National Team. Introduced in 2017, my source said, the tartan became such a hit with fans they refer to themselves as the Tartan Army and wear the kilt to show their pride. Good for them! Traveling from Scotland to Cologne to drink, sing, and watch football sounded like great fun, and their happy energy filled the plaza. Although the Scottish team was apparently a long-shot in the tournament, it mattered not to their fans, of course. I played soccer in high school and love the sport, which is the most popular in the world with *four billion* fans. We got hooked on the World Cup when Sterling and Olivia were young, but I had no idea what went on behind the scenes at a game. Now I had a hint.



Tartan Army invades Cologne

After depositing our bags at a nearby hotel, we worked our way through the kilted crowd to the front of the cathedral to meet a tour guide for a two-hour walk. For my Sagalands purposes, we were in Germany to tackle the 1% French and German contribution to my ancestry identified by a DNA spit test I took during winter. The analysis pegged an additional 6% of my ancestry as “undefined Northwest Europe” which means my DNA matches several populations in the region. “This shared heritage,” said the report, “may be the result of extensive migration, including the Germanic invasions of the early Middle Ages.” The Franks, in other words. They were a Germanic tribe living along the lower Rhine. They had a love/hate relationship with the Romans for centuries. On the one hand, the fiercely independent Franks fought the Roman empire to a standstill. At the

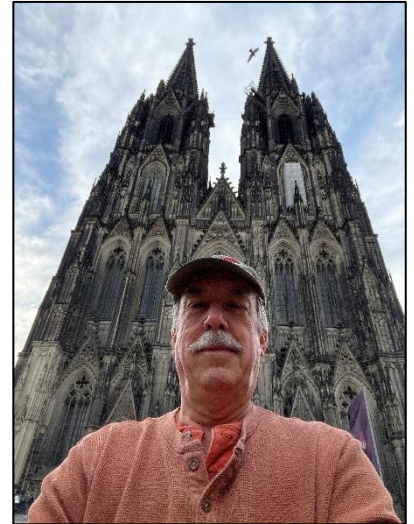


Franks on the move in the 6th century

same time, many Franks signed up for the Roman army. The result of all this contact was a “romanization” of Frankish society that would have profound impacts on European history. The center of action was Cologne, the largest city, fort, and port – and prize – on the Rhine. As the Roman empire disintegrated, Cologne held out until 460 when it was captured by, you guessed it, the Franks. They were just getting started. Employing military tactics they learned from the Romans, the Franks kept conquering. Soon, a new empire emerged in a place called...

Francia – the land of the Franks.

We met our guide, Servet, a retired schoolteacher, in front of the cathedral. After a spin through the giant church, we hit the trail. I wanted to hear about Cologne, Romans, the Franks, and what it all meant for German history. We were only here for one night, so I hoped to soak up as much as possible. However, we ran into three obstacles. First, the Romano-Germanic museum was closed. That was a disappointment. Second, it was hot. The cool weather in Amsterdam had given way to a burst of heat. It made a mid-afternoon walking tour a thirsty affair, especially since Servet kept up a brisk pace. Then there were the Scots. They were everywhere we went, singing, drinking, and mingling before huge TV screens set up for the big game that evening. The Scottish fans were wonderful, but I couldn't hear Servet very well over their happy noise. In compensation, she walked faster, which means I heard even less. Sterling and Olivia didn't have any trouble keeping up, but I did (I get distracted easily by the sights). I caught the part about Cologne being pounded



Selfie with cathedral



Scottish fans singing

to smithereens by Allied bombs during WWII and having to rebuild from scratch. That explained the 1950s-60s style to the buildings we saw, which is not attractive. Thankfully, the bombs didn't hit the cathedral. After bidding adieux to Servet, we headed back to the hotel for naps. Later, we scouted for supper amidst the kilted hubbub, finding, to our surprise, an empty table outside at an eatery with three TV screens set up for the game. Every other table was filled with Scots. This looked like fun, so we settled in to eat, drink beer, and root for Scotland. It was wonderful. The food, the beer, the warm evening air, the game, and the convivial vibe of humans being social combined to create a mellowness in me that I had been craving for months.

The next morning, the train was late. We had been warned by Aileen, the food tour guide in Amsterdam, that "German trains are always late." At the time, I wasn't sure I believed her – this was Germany, after all! But there we were in Cologne, waiting. An hour later, we boarded and headed north. Our destination was St. Goar, a small town on the Rhine River, halfway between Koblenz and Mainz. My trusty guidebook said this stretch of the Rhine, packed with medieval castles and pretty towns, was worth a visit. I booked an apartment for three nights and designed an

itinerary that would keep us busy, including an evening cruise on a party boat. After settling into our seats for the two-hour ride, Olivia put on her headphones and slipped into a world of music. Sterling put in ear buds and watched a video on his phone. I stared out the window. This trip to Europe had interrupted their busy, young lives – not that they were complaining. Sterling is a member of an improvisational comedy troupe in Portland, which he loves, and was missing a critical group audition to be here. Additionally, the unexpected visit to Santa Fe in May to deal with the house move meant he was nearly out of PTO (paid time off) at work and would be leaving us after our stay in St. Goar to get back. The trip was poorly timed for Olivia as well. A recent promotion meant she’s part of the management team at the bakery/café in Northampton, piling new responsibilities onto an already hectic social life. Neither one had a partner yet, though it was just a matter of time. They’re good people and their friends are like-minded souls. For our relationship, this trip felt like extra innings and I was grateful to be able to travel again with them.

We arrived in St. Goar at noon. The apartment was perfect. Not only did it have separate rooms, it had a coffee-maker in the kitchen and a table in the living room for dad to work on in the wee morning hours. It also had a view of the Rhine River and a medieval castle! How cool is that? After lunch, we walked a steep path under a hot sun to St. Goar’s main attraction: Rhinefels Castle. Founded in the 13th-century, Rhinefels quickly became the largest fortress on the middle Rhine. Its strategic location allowed it to control barge traffic on the river (by demanding tolls) and its mighty walls meant it played a huge role in the family feuds, political fights, religious persecutions, and military campaigns that wracked the Rhineland for centuries.

I leaned on a castle rampart and studied the lovely view of the Rhine River. The emperor I sought on this trip traveled often on the river, shuttling between palaces – or to war with his army. His name was Charlemagne. My 40th great-grandfather. Born in 748, Charlemagne became King of the Franks at age twenty, King of the Lombards in northern Italy in 774, and Emperor of what today is called the Carolingian Empire in 800. He was the first reigning emperor since Romulus Augustulus was deposed in 476, concluding the western Roman Empire. Charlemagne inherited an already substantial empire from his father Pepin the Short, who had overthrown Childeric III, the last of the Merovingian dynasty



Charlemagne's empire in 800 AD

of Frankish kings. The Merovingians were founded by King Clovis (466-511) who succeeded in bringing all the various Frankish tribes along the Rhine under his control and then conquering most of the old Roman province of Gaul. He is considered to be the first ‘King of France.’ Clovis also converted to Christianity, leading to religious unification across Europe. Pepin the Short was the son of Charles “The Hammer” Martel, a local prince who pulled an army together and stopped the Muslim expansion into western Europe with a decisive victory at the Battle of Tours in 732. The triumph cemented Frankish control of the region and set the stage for Charlemagne’s wars of conquest. Campaigning relentlessly for decades, Charlemagne expanded the Frankish kingdom to include what is today Germany, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, and the northern half of Italy – *Francia*. Charlemagne’s heirs remained in control of the continent until a certain enterprising viking named Rollo was granted a track of land around Rouen, France, in 911 by King Charles the Simple.

We know what happened next.

In the evening, we took a walk along the Rhine. We followed a well-worn footpath north from a ferry dock toward the famous Lorelei rapids, a perilous sequence of submerged rocks and sand bars that were the bane of sailors for centuries. Looming over the rapids is a 400-ft rock that was the home, according to German mythology, of a beautiful maiden who seduced sailors onto the rocks – and their deaths – with her singing. It was hard to imagine hearing anyone singing

today. In addition to steady flow of trucks on the river road, trains would blast past every five minutes or so. Then there was the barge traffic. For centuries, the Rhine has been a major highway for transporting goods from the North Sea through the heart of Germany all the way to the border of Switzerland. Nothing has changed except the goods. A steady parade of heavily-laden barges made their way up and down the river during our stroll. Many had a ‘sealed-up’ appearance suggesting they carried oil, natural gas, or industrial chemicals. The only treacherous spot on the whole journey was here at Lorelei. In 2011, a barge carrying sulphuric acid capsized below the



The Rhine with castle rock, blocking the river for days.

I kept pinching myself. I was walking along the Rhine River! Until this trip, I had never seen the world-famous river, much less strolled along its banks. At one point, we stopped walking so I could put my hand into the water briefly. I wanted to say I’ve touched the Rhine. I couldn’t

help myself. There's something about rivers. They're both timeless and utterly of the moment. They can be serene, but also an exciting portal to new adventures. As we walked, my thoughts drifted. Who were the Franks? I knew a few things. They were a people who spoke *Frankish*, a Germanic language similar to Old Dutch that eventually went extinct. Church and government officials spoke Latin and in the western part of the empire French prevailed as the language of the people. So it went with the Franks generally. In 508, they ditched their pagan beliefs when King Clovis was baptized. They adopted foreign styles of architecture, art, dress, and customs though they continued to wear their hair long and straight. They were highly militaristic and well-organized along Roman models. They were experienced in battle, utilizing every type of weapon, including naval forces. And they were accustomed to winning. Charlemagne put all of this to work on his behalf. Building on centuries of success, he led the Franks to an empire not seen since Rome.

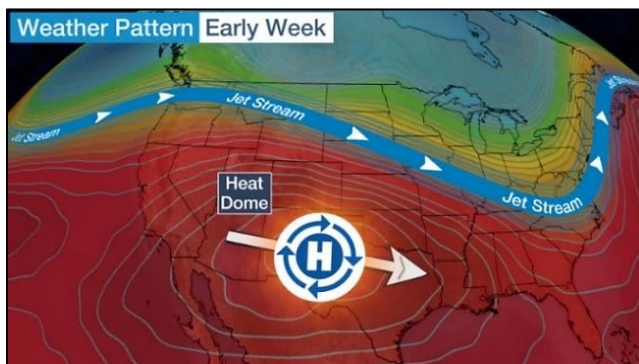
It wouldn't last a generation.



The next morning, I rose before dawn, made coffee, sat down at the dining room table, and fired up my laptop. Rising early to write is a habit I began when Sterling and Olivia were young. This morning, however, I didn't write. I checked the news instead. As usual, I had put an embargo on the daily news at the start of the trip, not wanting the relentlessly grim headlines and deliberately anxiety-inducing stories to ruin my fun. However, news had slipped through about a stubborn heat dome baking the western half of the U.S. A heat dome happens when a high-pressure system stalls



Feet and Rhine



June 2024 (weatherundreground.com)

over an area, trapping hot air like the lid on a cooking pot. Heat and humidity can quickly build under a dome making life miserable, especially if the stalling goes on for an extended period of time – as this one was doing. Heat records had fallen in northern California, Las Vegas, and Phoenix. Death Valley set a record at 128 degrees. No relief was in sight. I knew about heat domes. In 2011, I invited Bill deBuys, a

fellow conservationist and writer, to speak at the annual Quivira Coalition conference about his new book *A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest*. Heat domes have a big role in Bill's book. The climate scientists he interviewed said without reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, heat domes will become larger and last longer. Apparently, their predictions were correct.

There was more. Extreme heat was broiling other parts of the world as well, some with fatal consequences. In Saudi Arabia, three hundred people died in searing heat in Mecca while attending the annual Hajj, the world's largest religious pilgrimage. The Saudi Arabian government is aware of climate change and has spent vast sums of money to protect the pilgrims by erecting 100,000 air-conditioned tents, handing out water bottles, and building medical facilities to treat heat-related sickness. It wasn't enough for those who died – and it won't be for many others in the future as temperatures keep rising. According to the story I read, a [recent analysis](#) predicts by 2050 Mecca will endure 182 days of dangerous heat a year, including fifty-four days when it will even be dangerous to take refuge in the shade. “By those measures,” wrote the story's authors, “Mecca will be one of the least hospitable places on Earth.”

None of this was news to me. I've been reading climate science since 2007 after watching Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. While I accepted the premise of the documentary, I wanted to read the fine print. I love research – to do it, read it, and write it – so I jumped into climate science with both feet, reading articles, books, and reports, including ones published by the IPCC. I tracked the work of climate scientists and activists, including Dr. James Hanson and journalist Bill McKibben (who spoke at a Quivira Conference at my invitation). I attended climate conferences in Phoenix, Denver, Hamburg, and Montpellier, France. I followed the COP climate meetings, read responses by scientists to climate deniers, and digested the news as climate impacts became increasingly severe. I kept an eye on carbon dioxide levels at the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii, home of the Keeling Curve, as they kept rising. In December 2015, I went to Paris for the COP 21 summit and celebrated at the Eiffel Tower when the landmark Agreement was signed. Finally, it looked like the world would act on this existential crisis. Nearly ten years later, however, nothing had changed. Everything that followed Paris was just empty talk, empty pledges, and empty promises – what climate activist Greta Thunberg derisively calls more “blah, blah, blah.” The evidence was right there in the heat domes. I closed the laptop.

It was time to have fun again.

After breakfast, the kids and I spent the day touring quaint German towns along the river and waiting for late trains. Sterling estimated that we waited for two-and-a-half hours all together, which is a lot of wasted time in train stations, even if it is Europe. We visited Oberwesel first, in a light drizzle, then moved up the river to Bacharach, a popular destination. They were as pretty as promised by my guidebook, but there wasn't much going on. Even tourists were sparse, I thought. We walked the length of the attractive main streets, surveyed historic city walls, drank coffee, and took photos. I didn't mind the low energy of the towns. Actually, they were a relief after our people-packed stay in Amsterdam and raucous, crowd-filled Cologne. The quiet gave the three of us time to enjoy each other's company without the stresses of a big city – eat, chat, laugh. The kids practiced their college German. We talked about mom a little bit, but it seemed pretty clear to me they had moved on from their grief, as young people will do. Their lives are busy and full.



Oberwesel

In the evening, we did a major fun thing. We took a (delayed) train to Bingen, a busy town not far from Mainz, and found a table near the river at a crowded restaurant. As we ate, the sun came out, which we took as a great sign. At 7pm we headed to a nearby dock – it was time to board the party boat! Searching for river cruises online this spring, I stumbled across a once-a-month,

dance-and-drink cruise aimed at locals who wanted to blow off some steam after a long work week. Sounded good to me, and I was sure the kids would enjoy it. *The Rhenus* arrived right on time and we joined a sizeable crowd. Some people headed to the dance floor on the top deck, others spread out among the tables on the second level of the large vessel. We headed to the bow, which, to our surprise, we had mostly to ourselves. I stepped inside to order our first round of drinks. As the boat glided downstream, we bathed in evening sunlight, the warm air, and views of castles. There was one around every bend, it seemed. We drank, laughed, talked, and drank some more. We were cruising on the Rhine! How cool was that? Pretty damn cool.



Selfie with tequila sunrise

The next day we went for a hike. Our destination was Burg Eltz, which the author of my guidebook declared to be his favorite castle in all of Europe. We caught a train to Koblenz, delayed

as usual, and transferred to one that took us up the Mosel River to tiny Moselkern. We followed our phones through town, then walked a long stretch of road in a residential area. There weren't many opportunities for photos, so the kids chatted as we walked, catching up on various Dungeons & Dragons games they been watching and playing, what their mutual friends were doing, concerts, improv shows (Sterling) and Comicon conventions (Olivia) that they attended recently. I was impressed by their busyness, with full-time jobs too, but then their dad specialized in keeping busy. And I love how well they get along with each other despite the distances that separate them. We've been through a lot as a family, and it shows in their special bond.

The road ended at a pretty hotel. Crossing a bridge over Eltz creek, we followed a gentle trail into the woods, commencing a lovely hour-long hike to the castle. The lush forest reminded Sterling and I of Oregon, and he identified as many trees for us as he could as we walked. My leisurely pace meant the kids would zoom ahead and start chatting. It was wonderful to hike on a trail once again. For a while, trails filled my life. As President of the Backpacking Club in high school, I organized trips to national parks, wilderness areas, and others, culminating in a three-week backpacking adventure along the two-hundred mile length of the spectacular John Muir Trail, located atop California's Sierra Nevada mountains (a highlight of my life). I was so hungry at the end of the hike that I got sick on pizza our first night back in civilization. Gen loved trails as well and was always game for a hike. Some of my favorite memories are camping trips we took in the early years of relationship.



Approaching Castle Eltz

At the castle, we joined a long line of people at the entrance booth. Eltz is a 'living' castle, meaning its owners still occupy the parts of the structure. Once inside, we promptly bought food. We sat outdoors in the small patio, which reminded us of our trips to Carcassonne, a large, restored castle in southern France with lovely outdoor places to eat. That led to a round of reminiscing about our various trips to Europe over the years. I had to smile. I was forty-seven years old when I visited Europe for the first time (not counting a high school trip to the UK in 1976, which was a blur). At age 25, they've been to Italy, France, Germany, Scotland, Spain, London, Paris, Pompeii, now the Netherlands, the Rhine Valley, and shortly Belgium (for Olivia). They're aware of their privilege and are thankful for the opportunities. Sterling gave me a squeeze on the arm as a 'thank you.' It caused a small pang in my heart. He'll be leaving us in the morning to go home and I don't

know when the three of us will travel together again. In early September, I'll be going to Normandy solo. After that, I haven't made specific plans yet, though I have ideas about which Sagalands need to be visited next. Upending my life this spring has also upended my plans for travel. I'll figure it out once the dust settles.



Flowers at Eltz

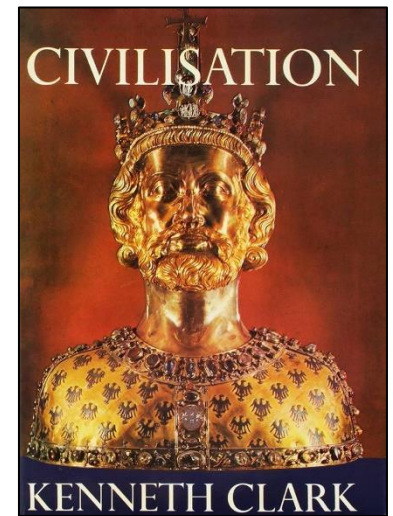
After lunch, we wandered through the castle's treasury rooms, filled with more rich people stuff, before deciding to skip the guided tour of the castle itself. I was happy to hang out in the courtyard and wander around the flower-filled grounds. I've described turn-around points in trips, when momentum shifts from 'going there' to 'going back.' This was our pivot, I realized with a sigh. On cue, it started drizzling on our walk back to the train station, the prelude to an afternoon of steady rain. My mood was lifted unexpectedly at the station when we are accosted in a friendly way by a group of drunk young women who were singing and having a good time. One young woman spied Sterling sitting on the bench and came over with questions about his camera, cup of alcohol in her hand. He was nervous. It was cute. It was a bachelorette party of local girls, it turns out. They asked us questions about where we were from and about our day, still interested in Sterling, though Olivia got questions too. It was great fun.

The train was late, of course, but this time we didn't mind at all.



We said good-bye to Sterling the next morning. We waited together at the St. Goar train station, preparing to head in opposite directions – north for him to the Frankfurt airport and home, south for us to Cologne and then on to Aachen. Fortunately, the travel gods smiled on us and both trains arrived on time. Sterling left first, but not without big hugs from his sister and me. He gave us a smile and a wave, then he was gone. Our train arrived a few minutes later, and as we settled into our seats, I gave a small wave to St. Goar out the window. I liked the apartment, with its coffee-maker, Rhine river view, and easy access to points beyond by train, however tardy. Maybe I'll come back to write and explore. Or maybe I'll find another apartment someplace else in Europe and do the same thing. I liked that idea. Selling my house and pocketing its equity as cash means I can be as footloose as I want. That opened a world of possibilities. The house wasn't sold yet,

however, and I didn't want to count any equity chickens before they hatched, so I decided to think about Charlemagne instead, whose tomb we would be visiting later today in Aachen. I first heard about the illustrious monarch from a groundbreaking BBC series in 1969 called "Civilization" which I watched in the lunch hall at school. Penned and narrated by Sir Kenneth Clark, an art historian and broadcaster, the series gave my adolescent imagination a profound jolt with its focus on art and architecture, as well as its exotic European locations (it was one of the first BBC documentaries to be shot in color). I pestered my father until he agreed to buy a copy of the book – which I still possess. Its cover features a gold bust of Charlemagne. According to Clark, the emperor was "the first great man of action to emerge from the darkness since the collapse of the Roman world." By 'darkness' he meant the cruelty, ignorance, and disorder that supposedly ran rampant during the 'Dark Ages' of early medieval Europe. Charlemagne was the "light" that restored order (with his conquering armies) and "saved" western society, at least according to Clark, by reconnecting mainland Europe with the "civilizing" cultures of the Mediterranean.

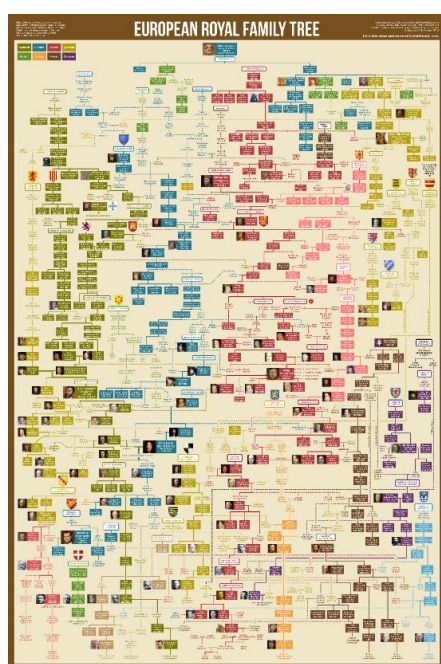


What was Charlemagne like as a person? According to a contemporary biographer, he was tall (six foot-four), had piercing blue eyes, a walrus moustache, and a small, squeaky voice. He was sturdy, had a round head on a short, fat neck and often had a bright and cheerful expression. He wore his hair short deliberately, setting a trend. Even as emperor, he continued to wear a plain, blue Frankish cloak. In addition to be an effective military leader and tireless campaigner, he was a skillful administrator to his empire. He was pious and worked strenuously to convert the 'pagans' on the borders to Christianity, usually at the point of a sword (side note: some historians theorize that Charlemagne's brutal wars against the Saxons and Danes provoked the vikings to retaliate by sacking monasteries and other holy sites, ushering in the Viking Age). Unusually for a monarch of the time, Charlemagne supported higher education, including for women. He ordered classical texts to be copied and in the process his scribes invented a beautiful style of Latin lettering now called 'Carolingian' which dominated for centuries.

Another sign of his forceful personality: his empire fell apart within a generation after his death in 814. His only surviving legitimate son, Louis the Pious, inherited the crown but not his father's gift for ruling. In his defense, Louis was confronted by repeated rebellions by his own

three sons, Lothair, Pepin, and Louis (Jr.), who fought each other and their father for a larger share of the kingdom. Louis made the situation worse by attempting to include his son Charles the Bald by his second wife in his succession plans, enraging the others (I'll return to Charles shortly). After Louis' death in 840, the empire was carved into thirds and then broken into smaller parts by more fighting and treaty-making. Despite the dissolution of his empire – or perhaps because of it – Charlemagne's reputation grew. His reign became the ideal of medieval kingship and the political structures and administrative reforms he implemented lasted for centuries. He would be eventually hailed as the "father of Europe" and his life would enter the realm of myth – continuing right down to a certain BBC documentary series in 1969.

For my purposes, it was the other meaning of Charlemagne as the "father of Europe" that mattered most. The amorous monarch had at least eighteen children with three wives and numerous

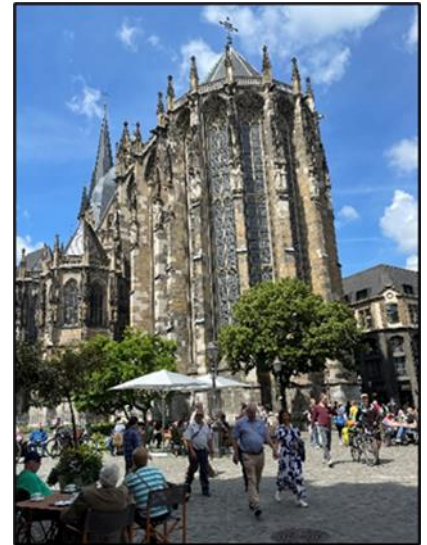


That's Charlemagne at the top

concubines. The descendants of his legitimate children flowed directly into the European Royal Family Tree, which includes kings and queens of France, Germany, England, and Italy. William the Conqueror is on the list via his paternal grandmother Judith of Brittany who was descended from Charlemagne's son Carloman. She married Richard II, Duke of Normandy – great-grandson of Rollo. However, the connection to the emperor I'm pursuing isn't through William the Conqueror, but his wife Matilda of Flanders. Charlemagne had at least twenty-two grandchildren, forty-nine great-grandchildren, hundreds of great-great-grandchildren, and so on for the next 1000 years. That's why nearly all white Europeans can trace a family line back to the emperor, and by extension so can anyone else with ancestral roots on the continent – like me. And possibly you!

Olivia and I arrived in Aachen at noon feeling famished. We deposited our bags at the hotel and then headed straight to an attractive plaza lined with trees and restaurants. We liked the city right away. It had a welcoming vibe that seemed authentic, possibly because the Aachen doesn't cater to the tourist industry. My 900-page guidebook to Germany devoted only a single paragraph to Aachen, a mighty come-down for what once was the capital of the sprawling Frankish Empire. We were here for the same reason others came to Aachen – to see Charlemagne's tomb. Actually,

many people apparently come to the city to soak in its famously stinky hot springs, which date back to Roman times. Charlemagne enjoyed the waters so much he decided to build a royal palace nearby. Under his guidance, Aachen grew into a capital city and a center of learning. In 793, Charlemagne began the construction of a private chapel that eventually became a cathedral. Olivia and I headed inside for a look. Its Byzantine style was a surprise. Turns out, the emperor chose a ‘East-meets-West’ theme for the holy edifice and his final resting place. It was exotic and lovely. It was also crowded with visitors. Charlemagne’s tomb was cordoned off and it was hard to get a good view through the forest of heads and cameras. I decided I would come back after a nap.



Charlemagne's cathedral

A bell woke me. I had left the hotel room window open and in the distance I could hear a solitary bell ringing. It had to be the cathedral. Not wanting to wake Olivia, I left the room quietly. Stepping inside the cathedral, I was surprised to find it nearly deserted. I walked to the cordon and gazed at Charlemagne’s golden sarcophagus in the soft light. My 40th great-grandfather. Matilda

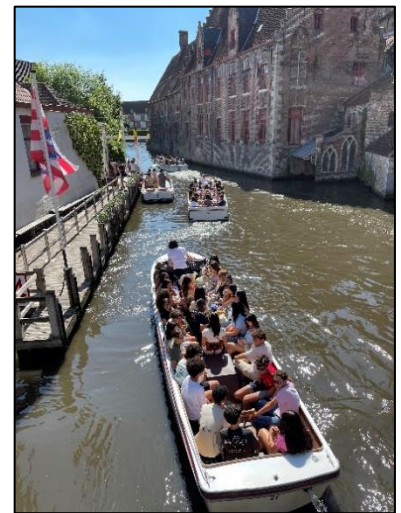


Charlemagne's sarcophagus

of Flanders was the daughter of Baldwin V, Count of Flanders, who was a direct descendent of Charlemagne via all the earlier Counts of Flanders. The first Count married Judith, the daughter of Charles the Bald, Charlemagne’s great grandson. I’ll call this family tributary *Charlemagne Creek*. It flows through Flanders and merges with *Rollo Creek* (which originates with the viking Rollo and flows through the Dukes of Normandy) when Matilda marries William the Conqueror and they produce nine children, including Henry I – my ancestor. From there, *Rollo Creek* rolls on through the *de Lacy* watershed. The key stories on *Charlemagne Creek* belong to Matilda and Judith, who lived in Bruges, Belgium – our next stop.



The trains were on time in Belgium, so Olivia and I were able to make a tight connection in Brussels, transferring to a sweltering commuter train. The weather had turned hot again and by the time we stepped out of the Bruges station into the blazing afternoon sunlight we were soaked with sweat. We joined a stream of fellow tourists flowing toward the medieval quarter of Bruges, hidden behind a long row of trees and barricaded by a busy road and a canal. It immediately reminded me of Disneyland. Crossing over the canal, we entered a very tidy, clean, frozen-in-time city, complete with attractive cobblestone streets and brick buildings. And visitors – *lots* of visitors. After dropping off our bags at our rather nice hotel (I had splurged for air conditioning), we walked to a main street where we were engulfed by a sea of people. The Disneyland feel was reenforced by the Belgian chocolate and waffle shops, souvenir stops, and designer clothing stores that lined both sides of the thoroughfare. Crossing a bridge, we could see boats filled with people chugging down a narrow canal. The only thing missing was Mickey Mouse. I knew Bruges had recently become an extremely popular destination, especially for cruise ships, which parked at the nearby port of Zeebrugge, but this was kinda nuts. To escape the crowds, Olivia and I ducked into a café, ordered coffee, and settled in at a quiet table. A sympathetic waiter explained that we had arrived at ‘peak’ cruise ship unloading. The flood of people would shrink to a trickle by suppertime, he said reassuringly, and Bruges would return to a normal city again.



Boat rides in Bruges

Later, I took a long walk to the market square in the heart of the historic city while Olivia rested. Bruges is popular for a good reason – it’s very pretty. Originally a coastal city, its strategic location was valuable first to the Romans and then to the Franks, who made it the administrative center of *Pagus Flandrensis* – the County of Flanders. The region’s prosperity attracted the attention of marauding vikings, prompting the first Count, Baldwin I, to fortify the city. Over time, Bruges became the center of a vibrant wool and textile industry. It grew fat and happy. However, the unstoppable silting of the river basin meant Bruges eventually lost direct access to the sea. City leaders responded with an elaborate system of interconnected canals, but these efforts proved futile as maritime activity and wool markets shifted to Antwerp. Bruges fell into steep economic decline. By the 1600s, the city was a shell of its former self. Construction of new buildings essentially ceased as people moved away. It froze in time. Spared the bombs of both World War I and II,

Buges' intact medieval quarter – one of the best in Europe – was discovered first by British tourists. In 2000, UNESCO designated the entire city center as a World Heritage Site, and the floodgates opened. I wasn't complaining. The city's architecture is a marvel to behold and its market square one of the best pedestrian-friendly open spaces I've ever visited.

It's not just for tourists either. As I wandered around, a group of young schoolchildren suddenly filed into the square behind their teachers. Each student carried an accordion. They split into small groups and spread out around the large square before positioning themselves on chairs behind music stands. Then they began to play music on their accordions. It was wonderful. People gathered to listen to the impromptu performances and applaud the young musicians. A sign announced them to be part of the *Conservatorium Brugge*. A little later, the young musicians coalesced into a small orchestra of accordions and embarked on a lively concert of pop tunes in front of a large, happy crowd. I had snagged a prime listening spot at the foot of a monument. Across from me was the flat-topped belfry, built in the 13th-century and home to forty-seven bells, quiet for the moment. I closed my eyes as the concert began, letting the warm sunlight and the music lead me into a blissful state.

Olivia and I spent the next day touring Bruges and nearby Ghent with a guide, Flavia, who hailed from Argentina. It gave me a chance to think about *Charlemagne Creek* and the stories of two of the most remarkable women in the entire *de Lacy Saga*. The first was Judith, the royal great-granddaughter of Charlemagne, who led a brief but extraordinarily eventful life, including defying her father, King Charles the Bald, to marry for love. Born in 843, she caught the eye of Æthelwulf, the King of Wessex, England, who was making a pilgrimage to Rome with his youngest son Alfred (later known as Alfred the Great). Stopping at the Frankish court, the widowed, sixty year-old Æthelwulf asked for the hand of twelve year-old Judith despite having five children who were older than his bride-to-be, including three sons. Shockingly, King Charles agreed – shocking because Carolingian kings traditionally prevented their daughters from marrying (thus preventing ambitious sons-in-law from becoming a threat), and never to a foreigner. Nonetheless, the marriage took place in 856, provoking a dramatic sequence of events. First, Charles insisted that his daughter be crowned Queen of Wessex, an unprecedented honor for a woman. Next, the prospect of Judith producing a younger, high-born son caused Æthelwulf's son, Æthelbald, to rebel against his father.



Little accordionists

The conflict was resolved two years later when Æthelwulf died without a producing a new heir. Æthelbald then proceeded to marry Judith – his stepmother – himself! Æthelbald died less than a year later (by poison, it was rumored), leaving Judith a twice-over widow at the tender age of sixteen. Her second marriage was also childless, so Judith returned to her father, who promptly sent her to a monastery, apparently against her will. End of story? Not at all.

A year later, a young count named Baldwin visited the monastery and fell in love with Judith. She returned his affection and with the assistance of her brother, eloped with the handsome young man. Her father, the king, was outraged. He demanded their capture and imprisonment, but Judith and her new husband eluded their pursuers with the help of her Carolingian cousins. Furious, King Charles ordered the Church to condemn their souls. In response, Judith and Baldwin fled to Rome where they were granted an audience with Pope Nicholas I. Hearing their pleas, Nicholas officially sanctioned their marriage. Grumbling, King Charles allowed the happy couple to come home. He put Baldwin in charge of the County of Flanders, where Baldwin built a residence for himself and Judith near where the Bruges Town Hall sits today. The region suffered from constant viking raids, leading to contemporary speculation that Charles hoped Baldwin would be killed by viking marauders. However, Count Baldwin proved to be highly skilled at defeating vikings, earning the nickname ‘Iron Arm.’ His success set Flanders on the path of power and wealth. He and Judith had three sons, including Baldwin II who married the youngest daughter of Alfred the Great. Judith died at the age of twenty-six, but not before living a life that she chose for herself, and with a man that she loved – fortunately for all of us who are her descendants!

The second remarkable woman is Judith and Baldwin’s great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter Matilda of Flanders, eldest daughter of Baldwin V. Her story is no less riveting, though apparently it didn’t involve true love, at least not at first. In fact, when her father accepted a proposal of marriage in 1048 for the beautiful and highly cultivated Matilda from the lowly and crude William (the future Conqueror), Duke of Normandy, she was mortified and refused to be betrothed. For William, her pedigree as a direct descendent of both Charlemagne and Alfred the Great meant their marriage would legitimize his place among the noble families of Europe. For the proposed bride, however, the exact opposite was true. William’s bastardy made him unsuitable to the high-born and haughty Matilda. Enraged at her rejection, the insulted William rode to Bruges, dragged Matilda from her horse by her braids, pushed her into the mud, and beat her. Then he jumped on his horse and rode home. Unsurprisingly, Count Baldwin promptly declared war on

Normandy. Conflict was averted when his daughter suddenly changed her mind. She would marry the bastard after all. No reason is given for Matilda's change of heart, though there were rumors that she was in love with a wealthy Anglo-Saxon lord named Brictric who had refused her romantic advances (years later, Queen Matilda ordered Brictric's extensive lands in Britain to be confiscated and the lord imprisoned, where he died). Perhaps she had settled on William as her second choice. The betrothal between William and Matilda hit a major snag, however, when the Pope declared them to be too closely related – called consanguinity – and prohibited their marriage. It's not clear what the Pope meant since nearly all elites in 11th century Europe were related to each other in some way (think: Charlemagne). In fact, both William and Matilda could claim the famous viking Rollo as their ancestor, he through Rollo's son Willam Longsword, and Matilda through Rollo's daughter Gerloc. It's unlikely the Pope had Rollo in mind. He was probably playing politics. In any case, the prohibition had no practical effect – the wedding took place anyway.

The marriage lasted thirty years and produced ten children. Perhaps in a sign of his feelings for his wife, William sired no known bastards, which was highly unusual for the era. Their son Henry I, for example, would have two legitimate and at least twenty-three illegitimate offspring. Matilda also earned her husband's respect. When he embarked with his army in 1066 to conquer England, sailing on a ship that Matilda had given him, William appointed her regent of Normandy to rule in his absence, a role she would repeat five more times over the next decade. Although she was crowned Queen of England at a ceremony in Westminster in 1068, Matilda spent most of her life in Normandy. In addition to her official duties, she was deeply involved in the education of their children. She seemed particularly fond of her eldest, Robert, a testy lad who took umbrage when his younger brothers, William Jr. and Henry, dumped the contents of a chamber pot over his head one evening as a prank. Enraged that his father didn't punish them, Robert rose in rebellion, only to be defeated and exiled by his dad. Behind her husband's back, Matilda had supported Robert's rebellion with gold, causing a serious rift when her betrayal was uncovered. Matilda made amends by negotiating a family truce, though William never again allowed her to rule Normandy in his absence. The emotional bond between them remained strong, however, and when she died in 1083, William was grief-stricken for the remaining four years of his life.

I asked Flavia the tour guide if there were any remains of the palace that Matilda or Judith would have occupied during their years in Bruges, but she shook her head. All of the old buildings had been replaced by new ones during the city's heyday in the 13th and 14th centuries, she said.

There was a history museum that might have artifacts, she suggested. I declined. I didn't feel like spending time inside staring into glass cases on such a lovely day, even if the temperatures outside were climbing again. We decided to move on to Ghent for lunch, followed by an afternoon walk around its medieval quarter. The contrast between the cities was obvious right away. Ghent is home to a large university and its downtown was packed with serious-looking young people – except for the ones sunbathing by the river. That looked like fun! In the medieval era, Ghent also became a major textile center, but it didn't suffer the economic collapse that Bruges did, partly because it was buffered by the university. As a result, its medieval area today is small and not as attractive, to be honest. It felt plunked down in the middle of a busy, modern city. After a few hours of wandering, we headed back to Bruges. I was ready for Disneyland again.

For supper, Olivia and I walked to the market square, picked a restaurant for its views, and ordered martinis – the same one we made back in Amsterdam. It was our last night in Belgium. Tomorrow we would travel to Amsterdam and then prep for early departures from the airport the next day. We weren't ready to go home, so we lingered over supper for quite a while. The evening air was perfect, warm and soft. The mellowness I had felt earlier on the trip returned. I was sitting with my daughter in the heart of a beautiful European city watching the last rays of the day ignite the buildings surrounding us. It had been almost a year since my trip to Scandinavia and the launch of my Sagalands adventure. I had started that journey with a heavy heart, searching for a new way of being under unwanted circumstances. I found purpose on the excursion – a writing project that would take me to new places and teach me about ancestors, tributaries, and family watersheds. All good – except this winter I realized it wasn't enough. I was adrift in the Doldrums emotionally. My head had purpose, but my heart did not. My heart felt like a jammed rudder, circling around and around. Rather than try to repair what was wrong, I quit my day job and abandoned the home ship this spring for another boat, tossing most of my life's cargo overboard as I made the transfer. I have no idea where this new ship is going, other than the Sagalands, or how long I will remain on board before transferring to a different boat, but my heart felt better immediately. It was open now to being mellow – and having fun. However, there was still a rough stretch ahead possibly. I had kept in contact with my real estate agent during the trip, and she reported that there had been very little interest in the house so far, which surprised her. We'd talk when I got back, she texted. Should I be worried, I asked? Not yet, she replied. She meant that to be reassuring, but it didn't work very well. I decided to have a second martini.

I studied the fading light on the lovely buildings. Had I found a new way of being yet? Was it even possible at my age? Adapting to unhappy circumstances, embarking on a new adventure, and forcing myself out of the Doldrums had been good, healthful decisions, despite their stress. Quitting my day job and leaving save-the-world work after four hard decades was definitely new. It had also been good for my health, lifting my spirits, and helping heal my heart. Did it all combine into a new way of being though? Did it even matter? I took a long sip of my drink, still watching the light. It did matter, I thought to myself. I had been unhappy and unwell for some time. I needed to admit that. Gen's declining health, our substantial debt, the empty nest, and other forlorn things had hurt my heart. Ironically, my save-the-world work, which involved advocating for positive and regenerative solutions to food, climate, and other pressing problems had not been regenerative to me personally. I was worn out and blue. I was reminded of something a speaker said at a Quivira conference years ago. She was the Sustainability Office at a large, progressive beverage company and she told the audience that she had learned "If it isn't fun, it's not sustainable." She was right, but I didn't take her words to heart at the time. I was having fun at work. It felt sustainable despite the long hours. Over the years, however, fun and joy drained away, especially as news headlines became increasingly grim. I finished my drink. A new way of being meant rediscovering joy.

It's never too late for that.



A toast to family and fun



