

*Joseph Holt*REREADING *SIDDHARTHA*

I.

For my thirtieth birthday I did an irresponsible thing: I cancelled class and went on vacation. That might sound like an innocent little personal day, but in truth I cancelled a week of class and flew off to another continent altogether. I went from my place in St. Paul to a few different spots in England. My purpose, I claimed, was to treat myself as I entered a new decade of adulthood. Yet somehow it seemed more urgent than that. Perhaps I was also hoping, in one short week, to break from the previous decade.

For at age thirty I had come to feel battered by my job, suffocated in my urban apartment, treadless in my social relationships. I was tired and unhappy. Although these days I keep an even temperament, on my thirtieth birthday I was mired in the darkest of all my dark periods, adrift in a crisis of both identity and existence.

That week in England I did a good amount of aimless walking, but I'd stop short of saying I acted as a flâneur. Rather, I was a tourist. I visited Abbey Road and the National Gallery, Stonehenge, Bath, Stratford-upon-Avon, the gardens of Shrewsbury, the docks at Liverpool and a vast Christmas market in Manchester. I smoked cigarettes and ate total garbage, picked through souvenir shops and stayed up late watching brainless British variety shows. I had fun. But in no way did I extricate myself, as I might have wished, from my own anxious life.

Perhaps my vacation's truest benefit was that, en route from my touristy destinations, I managed slippery moments of insight—revelatory thoughts that seem to accompany idle journeys. In *The Art of Travel*, Alain de Botton writes, "Few places are more conducive to internal conversations than moving planes, ships or trains. There is an almost quaint correlation between what is before our eyes and the thoughts we are able to have in our heads: large thoughts at times requiring large views, and new thoughts, new places." Whether gazing out a train window or resting on a bench along the River Thames, I was able to step outside myself and view my movements in context of the larger world around me, like a crane shot panning outward in a movie. In other words, fleetingly, I obtained perspective.

In those moments thirty appeared to me as a mile marker, one at which I could lay off the gas and peer back through the rearview mirror. I was needled by the essayist's common question: not *Who am I?* but *How am I*

who I am? What led me at age thirty to rest idly along the Thames, seeking calm while also shirking responsibility, thinking a weeklong vacation to England might serve as tonic for my restless spirit?

My twenties, to answer the question, had led me there. It was in that decade I set precedents for touring, for tramping, for searching. In my twenties I embraced transience and wanderlust—living in four countries and five U.S. states—and though it was all very exciting, I'd often suffered by my own impetuosity. I grappled with high expectations and limited means, finding that no matter where I stood contentment was elusive, satisfaction just out of reach. At age thirty, looking back at a full decade of my young life, I wondered if the 20-year-old me might ever have foreseen such indecision and rootlessness.

Probably, I think. At twenty, I was a college sophomore with wide eyes and passing interests, a middle-class kid living on loans. Though I was a reckless drinker and an inconsistent boyfriend, I was also a leader in my campus community. Like any twenty year old, I was too naïve to know I was naïve. To that point I had lived a comfortable, fortunate life, neither spoiled nor in want. I could easily have become complacent, but even then I recognized complacency as the great enabler of an unexamined life. That spring I decided I would strike out into the world.

Once the semester ended I drove from my home state of South Dakota to the Piedmont Triad of North Carolina, where I had secured work as a YMCA camp counselor. When I'd been researching summer jobs a couple months earlier, I might as well have drawn a destination from a hat. (If I recall, I chose North Carolina because in grade school I'd worn a Charlotte Hornets Starter jacket.) Any place would have sufficed, I believed, so long as it offered different terrain. Even at the time I understood this journey as more personal exercise than cultural immersion.

In North Carolina I settled into the 24-hour-a-day job of being a camp counselor—singing songs, teaching archery, ad-libbing ghost stories. My days were busy enough that I forgot I was supposed to be homesick. We counselors—a 50-person staff hailing mostly from the Piedmont Triad, but also from Europe, West Africa and South America—received one night of leave each week. On these nights we would caravan into Winston-Salem, eat at a restaurant we could hardly afford and otherwise loiter in any brightly lit public space. On one of those weeknight trips I made a small purchase that would prove invaluable to my becoming the man I was for the remainder of my twenties.

From a regular old chain bookstore I bought the New Directions paperback of *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, translated by Hilda Rosner.

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If *Siddhartha* has reached the status of cult classic (or counterculture classic or even genuine classic), it's this New Directions edition that's most recognizable. Its cover is medium blue, with the title and author's name in block white lettering. The sole illustration is a bronze-like statue of a young Brahmin meditating. Its pages are pulpy in texture and the resolution of the ink is a bit smeary. It cost me six dollars.

Although the novel is only 150 pages, I read it slowly. Supervising a cabin of pre-adolescents, I would be lucky to steal away ten-minute blocks during afternoon quiet time or at night after lights out. When I made time to read I found the prose of *Siddhartha* lyrical and engrossing, the settings vivid and exotic, the characters unfailingly resolute. Just the same, my reading took the pace of a slog. I read *Siddhartha* with curiosity and appreciation, but not rapture. I got stranded 100 pages in.

Then we counselors had a long weekend over the Fourth of July. In staff tradition we drove southeast to Topsail Beach, a barrier island community unspoiled by tourism or industry near Wilmington, North Carolina. I took along *Siddhartha*, hoping I might finish it while lying on the white sands along the Atlantic Ocean—which I did, and which, for any number of reasons, affected me beyond any logical sense of proportion.

In those first 100 pages the young Brahmin Siddhartha departs his family's village to pursue a life of self-denial in the forests. Later he and his friend Govinda travel to witness the Illustrious Gotama (the Buddha) and his followers. After that Siddhartha embarks on a life of materialism, acquiring wealth as a merchant and learning the art of love from the courtesan Kamala. Through all these pursuits Siddhartha's quest remains the same: the attainment of wisdom (not knowledge) and an understanding of man's purpose in the world.

Around the 100-page mark, when I began reading again, Siddhartha grows repulsed by his self-indulgence. He denounces his riches and abandons the city, flees in his fancy clothes to a river, where he stares at his reflection and considers drowning himself. He falls asleep. He awakens, reborn. For the final third of the novel Siddhartha lives humbly along the river as a ferryman's apprentice.

It's in this newfound simplicity, after years of stillness and listening to the river, that Siddhartha finally reaches self-awareness—that he discovers, to put it broadly, the unity of life. He learns that the struggles of one man are the struggles of all men, that experience is cyclical, our follies repaid us, our sorrows recurring. The analogy employed by Hesse (and adopted from Hindu mythology) is simple enough: "The water changed to vapor and rose, became rain and came down again, became spring, brook and river,

changed anew, flowed anew.” In the river Siddhartha sees the faces of his past merge and the voices of all humanity unite into “one word: Om—perfection.” By surrendering his will, Siddhartha gains serenity; by effacing himself and his own desires, he comes to know the harmony of all mankind.

Siddhartha’s epiphany, as I read it on the sands of Topsail Beach, became my epiphany as well. But moments of insight are naturally preceded by ignorance. My ignorance was this: having spent my first twenty years in the flat farmland of eastern South Dakota, I knew nothing of the natural world, geology or geography, and until that weekend had never witnessed the ocean. (As it was, the rolling waves seemed kindred to a field of wheat rippling in the prairie wind.) Hesse’s analogy of the hydrologic cycle—the ever-flowing river—framed the continuity of experience in a way I had never once imagined.

Right then, reading the final ten pages of *Siddhartha*, I was overcome by an indescribable ecstasy. I felt it in my limbs—a tingling, my every sense engaged. Like Siddhartha by the river, I found myself “completely absorbed, quite empty, taking in everything.” I was aware of the sand, the shells, the gulls, the vast expanse of water, each molecule connected to the next. It was, I can say with certainty, the single most mindful moment of my young life.

It’s with this realization of earthly unity that Siddhartha’s wandering ends. But for me something was starting anew. In me already was the kindling of wanderlust, and *Siddhartha* was the spark that set me aflame. *Siddhartha*, as I understood it, was a novel about a seeker, a protagonist with an unquiet heart, a man both rebellious and self-determined.

II.

Cue the restlessness. The stuffed-to-the-seams suitcase, the passport stamps I treasured like merit badges. The hunger, the heartache, the breathlessness. And oddly enough, conflicting feelings of gratitude and discontent.

After college I went from the plains of South Dakota to a squalid, neon-lit district of urban Taiwan; following that I lived in the coal valleys of southern Wales, and then again the Appalachian foothills of North Carolina. I kept shuffling: the saguaro fields outside Tucson; graduate school in Grand Forks; a small fjord town south of Oslo, Norway. Finally I landed in downtown Minneapolis, only soon to cross the Mississippi River and settle in the Midway district of St. Paul. For the most part I supported

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myself as a teacher, although at times I worked as a secretary, gas station clerk, grunt on a factory line, jewelry salesman, copyeditor and waiter.

I made decisions with little regard for consequence—and there were consequences. By twenty-two already I entered treatment for alcohol dependency. Confused and ashamed, I fled my family and my ever-patient girlfriend, returning later only once I'd drained my accounts to zero. Despondency could engulf me, remorse, self-censure. Old friends disappeared and no new ones took their place. By twenty-seven I finally quit drinking, only then to be saddled with stultifying panic. A new girlfriend took me in and I failed her in new, creative ways. Everything I did, my actions fell short of my aspirations.

Those wayward errors, those pratfalls of young adulthood—they landed me at age thirty, as I noted, in the darkest of all my dark periods, plain stifled by my petty anxieties, admitting for once that I was without all the answers. Not long after returning from my weeklong vacation to England, I enrolled in a night class for basic mindfulness held at St. Paul's Clouds in Water Zen Center. In this class I studied writings by Jon Kabat-Zinn, practiced yoga, tai chi and sitting meditation. I was (and still am) pretty lousy at focusing my energies. But over time I saw that with a little patience, quietude and attention to my breath, I could better comprehend my place in the large, chaotic world. (Of course, once the class ended I failed to practice meditation even once. Instead I tried bettering myself through a regimen of playing basketball, repeated attempts at quitting smoking and a couple summers working highway maintenance.)

And just recently, the lessons of mindfulness still keen in my memory, I went to my bookshelf and plucked out *Siddhartha*. I reread it and discovered a book different from the one I'd read ten years earlier. It was not nearly so intimate, so visceral as it had been in my memory. This time around the characters' determination came off as egoism, and the lessons of self-fulfillment rang like *bon mots* from Spiritualism 101. As a whole, it struck me more as a tract than a dramatic narrative. If I sound overly critical, I don't mean to be. What I was now realizing was that *Siddhartha* operates as a fable, not a work of literary realism. As is so common upon rereading our cherished books, the words on the page hadn't changed, but the reader had.

Now, as a lecturer in English, I had sharpened my critical eye with structuralism and skepticism. Although as a reader I'm no less enthusiastic, my enthusiasm is harder earned. And while *Siddhartha* lends itself well to cultural appreciation (it has been profoundly influential), it is less suited for critical evaluation. Like Steinbeck and Fitzgerald and Frost, for whatever

reasons, Hesse seems relegated to the high school classroom. In other words, *Siddhartha* is something we're meant to outgrow. In an essay on *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, Pico Iyer makes passing reference to Hesse, along with D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, as "one of those enthusiasms of youth that one put away with childish things." Looking at *Siddhartha* at age thirty, I felt indeed that it belonged in a shoebox of keepsakes, beside my Bob Marley *Legend* cassette and the *Pulp Fiction* VHS tape, reminders of who I was once but am no longer.

Yet I still appreciated *Siddhartha*. Rereading it showed me who I'd been ten years earlier, my nascent desires and emerging beliefs, now on full display in the passages I had highlighted. If I thought of myself back then as a seeker, it showed in how I sought out epigrams:

- **On contemplation:** "Through thought alone feelings become knowledge and are not lost, but become real and begin to mature."
- **On mutualism:** "One can beg, buy, be presented with and find love in the streets, but it can never be stolen."
- **On overdetermination:** "When someone is seeking... it happens quite easily that he only sees the thing that he is seeking."

Apparently I wanted answers, secrets and directions for carving out my own enlightened existence. I wanted to adopt Siddhartha's moral quandaries (and their attending solutions) and play them out in my own life. In no small way, I wanted to believe I was Siddhartha, Siddhartha me. And perhaps that's why we read fiction: the endeavor of empathy. But at age twenty I didn't grasp that *Siddhartha* was never intended as a case study for the examined life. It's fiction, not self-help. It shouldn't be treated as a guidebook into personal maturity.

My restless twenties weren't set in motion solely because I read *Siddhartha* at an impressionable age—that would be giving myself too much credit as a reader. In fact, I was probably more influenced by how I *misread* the novel. With all my highlighting, all my isolating key phrases, I treated *Siddhartha* like a word search or a scavenger hunt. This soundbite-driven approach runs antithetical to the entire point of *Siddhartha*: that all the teachings in the world do not equate to wisdom. This lesson is everywhere in the book, no matter in what stage of life Siddhartha finds himself.

- **On self-reliance:** "A true seeker could not accept any teachings, not if he sincerely wished to find something."
- **On learning:** "Wisdom is not communicable.... Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom."

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This theme points to the great contradiction of *Siddhartha*: although the book contains innumerable truths, these truths are valid only when derived from firsthand experience. In that regard I was fortunate to misread the novel at age twenty; odds are I only would have become frustrated by this conundrum. Or perhaps I hadn't read *Siddhartha* with ignorance, but rather arrogance. Maybe I only sought inspiration, someone to hand me the torch of youthful abandon so I could run with it any direction I pleased.

I would take that torch, of course, and add to it my own fuel. Afterward I would frame my days according to those of the wandering Brahmin, tweaking my perception of North Carolina in Summer 2001 to reflect the world of *Siddhartha*. Like a palimpsest I wrote the book onto my experiences, and over that I wrote my experiences into the book. When months later I had forgotten the words of *Siddhartha*, its themes of experimentation and reinvention had become tattooed upon my soul, even if I no longer recognized the origin of the ink.

Once the camp season ended I returned to South Dakota, and in no time my precociousness gave way to self-destruction. The wounds would smart, but I trusted that only through experience, good old-fashioned trial and error, could I glimpse the true nature of sorrow and joy, chaos and peace. Although in the years to come I would traverse miles upon miles of physical geography, it would pale in importance to my travels in moral geography—the thrill of independence and the hardship of expectation.

Siddhartha was the book I needed as I was beginning my twenties. It set me loose into a future that seemed limitless, full of possibility. Yet it's not the book that will guide me into my thirties. (If any book does, I probably won't recognize it until I'm forty.) The young Brahmin, his wanderings, his enlightenment—these were no nowhere near my consciousness as I rested along the Thames at my thirtieth birthday, gazed out train windows, breathed in the salt off the Irish Sea. Rather, in my fleeting moments of insight I selfishly thought of myself, my errors and past waywardness, the man I might become in the ensuing decades. Had I considered whether the Brahmin Siddhartha might approve of my self-seeking, I'd have known there's no teacher but one's own experience, and that our paths compose but a single journey.