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Home / Exclusive / William Brinson for Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip CaputoIn Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman celebrates the races and nationalities of America, making a thousand different contributions to the nation's only identity, its lands always united. Comparing Americans to the leaves of a branched tree, he invites readers of his poem to gather for themselves bouquets of the incomparable feuillage of these states. Looking back, I think that's what I was doing when I recently made the longest road trip of my life: accept Whitman's invitation, gather bouquets. Towing an airstream trailer leased and old behind a van, I traveled with my wife, Leslie, and our two English setters, Sage and Sky, from the southernmost point of the continental United States, Key West, Florida, to the northern end we reached by road, Deadhorse, Alaska, on the grey coasts of the Arctic Ocean. The four of us drove through 18 states and northwestern Canada, more trees and under wider skies than we could ever imagine. We baked at temperatures of more than 100 degrees for weeks, witnessed the spectacular rays and hails of the Midwest, and eventually drove through a snowstorm. The return-home route in Connecticut took us to Texas, where we delivered the Airstream back to its owner. In total, we cover 16,241 miles in just under four months. Some friends and relatives said I was crazy to try such a monumental journey at my age: the age of 70. But I had been inspired by the memory of the day, in 1996, when I was in Kaktovic, a settlement on the wind-swept barter island, right on Alaska's north coast. I marveled that their inupiat Eskimo schoolchildren swore allegiance to the same flag as the children of Cuban immigrants in Key West, 6,000 miles away. Two islands more separate than New York City is from Moscow and yet part of the same country. It seemed almost miraculous that such a vast nation, populated by almost all races, ethnicities and religions on earth, managed to remain in one piece. What, I was wondering, kept the United States together? Years after that trip to Alaska, I was making a variation of that question. Did the nation stay together as well as it used to? As I read and heard the news, I had the impression that Whitman's ever-united lands had fragmented into a nation of patches of red and blue states where no one could agree on much of anything. But how accurate was that impression? When Leslie and I left Key West, I decided to find out by asking the Americans every day the same question she had asked me: What keeps us together? I spoke to more than 80 people: white, Latino, African-American and American. They came from all walks of life, including one politician in Florida and another in Alaska, a farm woman in Missouri, a wrestler in Montana, college kids living in commune in Tennessee, an ice road trucker, and a taco entrepreneur who was also a lakota Sioux shaman. William Brinson for Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip CaputoWhen Leslie and I arrived in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, that city and most of northern Alabama were still recovering from deadly tornadoes they had hit in a single day a month earlier. Parts of Tuscaloosa seemed bombed carpets. We volunteered to help with the relief effort. A volunteer center coordinator told us that more than 14,000 people from almost every state in the union had participated. He asked us to write our initials on a map covered in U.S. acetate that showed the volunteers' states of origin. Did you want to discover the strength that joined America's atoms with each other? Perhaps I was looking at him: a spirit that had moved thousands of men and women to travel great distances to help troubled fellow citizens. We were assigned to a hangar-like warehouse, where we were hit by industrial fans that were all but useless in the 102-degree heat. We load boxes of food, medicine and clothing with 20 other volunteers, mostly young people from ecclesiastical groups. The volunteers were white; his supervisors, from the Seventh-day Adventist relief services, were black. This in Tuscaloosa, where in 1963, Governor George Wallace promised in his inauguration address: Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever! William Brinson for Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip CaputoTda weeks later, after a stay in Mississippi and Tennessee, we were camped at Meramec Farm in the green Missouri Ozarks. It is owned by Carol Springer, a compact blonde who raises cattle and horses on 470 acres. The farm has been in his family for seven generations. As we sat in her kitchen drinking lemonade, she gave me her perspective on what the unum puts in our national motto, E pluribus unum: Glue is a belief that is not clearly defined: that we have more in common than not, that we are more alike than we are different. I'm not sure it's true, but the important thing is that we think it is. In other words, I asked him, does perception become reality? Springer shrugged. I've been known to believe I'll come home in the dark in the rain. I'm not convinced, but I think I will, and I get there. We passed Missouri, crossing the oceanic extensions of the Great Plains, to the wastelands of South Dakota. There, near the depressed Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, we stopped at a restaurant. You should meet Ansel Woodenknife, the cook said after ordering fried bread tacos. He's a good guy. Up-to-date I called Woodenknife, who had invented the plate of fried bread tacos, at his home in Interior. A broad-faced, heavily constructed man greeted me at the front door. Busy studying for EMT EMT couldn't talk then, but he stopped by our campsite a couple of nights later. Woodenknife, too, was surprised by the size and diversity of the United States, and that somehow did not fall apart. It's about the change, he told me. This is the only country where everything changes all the time. People come here expecting change, and if they're going to survive, if they're going to succeed, they have to learn to adapt to change, to different people of different races. Woodenknife's formal education ended in ninth grade, but he earned a doctorate in adaptation. Born in the neighboring Rosebud Reserve, raised as one of 12 children in a cabin without electricity or running water, he was taken from his parents at the age of nine, against his wishes, and placed in a white foster home in Philadelphia. That happened to thousands of Native American children, trapped in a government program to de-Indianize them. It didn't work in Woodenknife's case. He fled so often that he was marked as incorrigible and sent back to the reserve, where he learned to cling more fiercely to his traditional culture, becoming a Lakota Sun-Dancer.He also became a businessman, running a busy restaurant and marketing Indian fried bread tacos to supermarket chains across the country. In 2003, Citing himself as a example. Woodenknife did not believe the crucible was the way to national unity. Rather, he said, every American should try to stay true to his or her ethnic heritage while maintaining an American identity. The fabric of the country would then be, he said, a blanket of color, all sewn in the form of the United States. William Brinson for Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip CaputoLeslie and I stayed off interstates for the most part, sticking to ancient routes like the Natchez Trail, burning through the first American settlers, and the Lewis and Clark Way, a network of major roads and side roads following the route taken by the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1804 to 1806.At Montana ranch, we set up alpine meadows with a young man. Barely five feet tall, Apel described herself as a gangster girl who had grown up on the east side of St. Paul. It had become a horse fight to save himself from that life. Apel embraced the dissension he feared was tearing apart the nation's seams. I think the country is definitely in disarray, he said. At the same time, to grow as a country, we need to have conflicts and the conflict is healthy. But the media has this amazing way of blowing it out of proportion. The Lewis and Clark Way finally brought us to the Pacific coast. We head north, cross the Canadian border, and we alaska's historic road through British Columbia and the Yukon in North of Fairbanks, we picked up the northernmost road in the United States: the Dalton Highway, more than 400 miles of gravel and buckled asphalt. Road conditions make it a risky journey, and the landscape—endless stretches of mountains and tundra, trans-Alaska pipeline crossing, and landscape crossing—can be hypnotic. But we only had one mishap, one flat tire, before we reached our goal. Seventy-nine days after starting from Key West, we stop on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. We immersed ourselves in our toes—briefly, because polar bears had been seen nearby—and added arctic water to a bottle that I had already filled in part with water from the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean.Five thousand miles and three weeks later, I dropped the air current in Breckenridgeridge Texas. There, I heard the succinct answer to my big question. It was given by Airstream owner Erica Sherwood, a 37-year-old small business owner. As I sat down to tell traveler's stories to Erica and her husband, Jef, she turned things around throwing the question at me. Following my example of Annaliese Apel's observations on the conflict, I used a metaphor for astronomy: A star remains a star due to the dynamic imbalance between its gravity, which pulls it inwards, and nuclear fusion, which sends its matter flying out. If there's too much of one or the other, it collapses on itself or falls apart. Almost since its inception, the United States has been dragged in the direction of maximum individual freedom by Thomas Jefferson's idea that the government that governs less governs better, and in the opposite direction by Alexander Hamilton's belief in centralized power. I said it is the perpetual but equal conflict between these extremes that generates binding force. Too much Jefferson could lead anarchy, too much Hamilton to tyranny. Erica and Jef found that a little weird and abstract, so I asked about Erica's thoughts about what united the Americans, and she nailed it. It's hope, he said. Isn't that what it's always been? Philip Caputo is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author of 15 books. His most recent is The Longest Road, from which this essay adapts. Adapted.

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