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William Brinson and Walt Whitman for The Leader's Digest/Courtesy Philip Caputoin Grass leaf make thousands of different contributions to the ever-united land that is america's identity, celebrating america's race and nationality. He compares Americans to the leaves of a tree, inviting poetry readers to collect bouquets of incomparable fashion from these countries. In retrospect, I think that's what I was doing recently when I took the longest road trip of my life, accepting Whitman's invitation and collecting bouquets of flowers. Towing an antique Airstream trailer rented behind a pickup truck, I imagined my wife, Leslie, our two English setters, sage and sky, traveling from the southernmost reaches of the continental United States, Key West, Florida, Roads, Deadhorse, Alaska, the farther northerly to the gray shores of the Arctic Ocean. We baked in temperatures above 100 degrees for weeks and witnessed spectacular lightning and hail in the Midwest, which eventually caused a blizzard. The circuit to our connecticut home took us to Texas, and we handed airstream back to the owner. In less than four months, it covered 16,241 miles. Some friends and relatives told me that I was nuts trying to make such a monumental journey at the age of 70. But I was inspired by the memory of that day in 1996, when I settled on wind-swept Barter Island, just outside Alaska's northern coast. I was surprised that Inupiat Eskimo students pledged allegiance to the same flag as the children of Cuban immigrants in Key West, 6,000 miles away. The two islands, farther than New York City, come from Moscow but are part of the same country. It seemed almost miraculous that a vast nation could have stayed in one piece by almost every race, ethnicity and religion on earth. It was rare to think that the United States would have been held together. A few years after that Alaska trip, I asked myself a variation of that question. Has the country stayed together as it once did? From reading and listening to the news, I was under the impression that Whitman's ever-unified land had been fragmented into a patchwork state of red and blue states where no one could agree much on anything. But how accurate was that impression? When Leslie and I left Key West, I decided to find out every day by asking Americans the same questions I could do for me. I've talked to more than 80 people, including whites, Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans. They come from all over the world, including politicians in Florida and other farmers in Alaska, farm women in Missouri, Wranglers in Montana, and college students living in communities. An ice road truck driver and taco entrepreneur who is also a Lakota Water Shaman. Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip Caputo Leslie and I arrived in Tuscaloosa when William Brinson, that city and much of northern Alabama, was still recovering from a deadly tornado that struck about a month ago a day. Some parts of Tuscaloosa looked as if they had been carpet-bombed. We volunteered to help with relief efforts. A coordinator at the volunteer center said more than 14,000 people from nearly every state in the union pitched in. He asked me to write his initials on an acetate-covered map of the United States showing the volunteers' hometowns. Did you want to discover the forces that bind America's atoms to other atoms? Maybe I was watching it: a spirit that moved thousands of men and women travelling long distances to help fellow citizens in distress. We were assigned to a hangar-like warehouse and buffeted by useless industrial fans in the heat of 102 degrees. We, along with about 20 other volunteers, loaded food, medicine, and clothing, mostly young people from Church organizations. The volunteers were white. The supervisors at the 7th Day Adventism Disaster Relief Service were black. In his inaugural address in 1963, Governor George Wallace vowed so in Tuscany that he now vowed segregation, separation tomorrow, and segregation forever! Two weeks after Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip Caputo, after staying in Mississippi and Tennessee, we camped at Meramex Farm in Ozac, Green Missouri. It is owned by Carol Springer, a compact blonde raised cattle and horses on 470 acres. The farm has been with his family for seven generations. As we sat in the kitchen sipping lemonade, she gave us a perspective on having unum in our national motto. E pluribus unum: glue is a clearly u definition of faith: that we have more in common than we are not, and that we are more alike than others. I'm not sure if that's true, but the important thing is that we believe it is. In other words, do I see perception as a reality? and asked. Springer shrugged. It is known to believe that you will return home in the darkness of the rain. I'm not sure, but I believe I will, and I get there. We moved from Missouri across the oceanic openlands of the Great Plains to the South Dakota wasteland. Near the gloomy Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, we stopped at a restaurant. I have to meet Ansel Udny, the chef said after I ordered the frypan tacos. He's quite a man. The next day, I called Woodknife, who invented the fried bread taco dish at his house in the interior. A man who was built wide and strong greeted me at the front door. Busy studying emt exams, he was not able to speak. But a few days later I fell into the campground. Woodcalf, too, said he was surprised by the size and diversity of the United States, and somehow didn't fall into pieces. It's because of the change. He told me. This is the only country where everything changes all the time. If people can come here and survive in anticipation of change, if they succeed, they must learn to adapt to change for others of different races. Udny's formal education ended in the 9th grade, but he received a Ph.D. in Adaptation. Born in the neighboring Rosebud Reserve and raised as one of 12 children in a cabin with no electricity or running water, he was placed in a white foster home in Philadelphia at the age of nine against their wishes from his parents. It happened to thousands of Native American children, and they were de-guided under a government program. It did not work in the case of wooden knives. He too often ran away, branded indomitable, returned to reservations, and he learned to be more fiercely obsessed with traditional culture, eventually become a Lakota Sun dancer. He also became an entrepreneur, ran busy restaurants and marketed Indian fried tacos to supermarket chains across the country. In 2003, he was inducted into the Small Business Hall of Fame in South Dakota. For example, Udnaf didn't think melting pot was the path to national unity. Rather, he said, each American should strive to remain true to their national heritage while maintaining their American identity. Then it will be the fabric of the country, he said, blankets of color, all sewn into american shapes. Reader's Digest/Courtesy William Brinson and I stay on most highways, clinging to old paths like Natches Trace, Blaze by Early American Settlers, Lewis and Clark Trail, a path taken by Lewis and Clark Expeditions and then a network of major highways and back roads in 1804 1806. At on a ranch behind Montana, we rode a young alpine meadow, and we wrestled with a young alpine meadow. Barely 5 feet tall, Appel described himself as a girl gangster when he grew up east of St. Paul. She turned to a horse fight to save her from her life. Appel accepted the feud I feared. I think this country is definitely in turmoil. She said. At the same time, to grow as a nation, we need conflict, and conflict is healthy. But the media has a wonderful way of blowing it out of proportion in this wonderful way. The Lewis and Clark Trail eventually brought us to the Pacific coast. We headed north, across the Canadian border, through British Columbia and the Yukon, up the Alaska Highway to Alaska. We picked up the northernmost road in america: the Dalton Highway, more than 400 miles of gravel and curved asphalt. Road conditions make for a dangerous drive, and the endless mountains and tundra, trans-Alaska oil pipeline crossings and landscape crossings can be hypnotic. But we had only one accident, a flat tire, before we reached our goal. 79 days after our departure from Key West, we were standing at the foot of the Arctic Ocean. We briefly dropped our toes because polar bears were seen nearby, and I had already added arctic water to a bottle filled with water from the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean 5,000 miles, three weeks later I dropped an airstream in Breckenridge, Texas. There I heard the most concise answer to my big question. It was given by the owner of Airstream, Erica Sherwood, a 37-year-old small business owner. Telling Erica and her husband Jeff the traveler's story, she turned the tables, asking questions again. Taking my cues from Annerjee Appel's remarks about conflict, I use a metaphor in astronomy: stars remain stars because of the dynamic imbalance between gravity, which pulls inside, nuclear fusion, which sends material flying outside. If one or the other is too many, it collapses on its own or blows away. Almost from birth, the United States has been pulled up in the direction of individual freedom by thomas Jefferson's idea that at least the governing government is the best governed, and in the opposite direction by Alexander Hamilton's belief in centralized power. Generating a binding force is a permanent but equal conflict between these extremes, I said. With so many Jeffersons, it can be anarchy, and Hamilton can lead to too much tyranny. Erica and Jeff found it a little strange and abstract, so they asked erica's thoughts about what united Americans, and she nailed it. It is hope. she said. That's not always the way it is? Philip Caputo is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author of 15 books. It's the longest road his latest essay has been applied to. Adapt.

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