

## Perception/Reality

When I was in Vietnam I promised myself that if I made it out alive I would get a motorcycle and tour the country to try to understand what I was fighting for. I think now this was ostensibly more a prayer that I actually survive than an actual plan but it gave me something to look forward to.

I did survive and returned to California where I married, finished college, and began work as a Recreation Therapist for Sutter Hospital in Sacramento. Life according to plan. After a few years of working with the emotionally disturbed and a divorce, I began once again to doubt my own sanity. Having worked through a period of what is now called PTSD I became unsure if working with a disturbed population was emotionally healthy for me. Remembering my promise/prayer, I asked for and was granted a one year leave of absence.

I bought touring motorcycle and my girlfriend and I set out to see the country. We spent the summer touring across Canada and the US, spending much of our time on the East Coast from Maine to the Florida Keys. In October we drove back to Boston where Betty's sister lived. Betty decided to stay in Boston and make enough money to fly her three children from California to Louisville, Kentucky for Thanksgiving with her family. She found jobs at KFC, and Dunkin Donuts, hefty work for someone with her masters in psychology.

I continued on the return trip to California alone with a first stop to see a friend in Mystic, Connecticut. Jennifer had married a boat builder and was in the process of building her first boat by hand. We had a great evening of good food, wine and conversation. After spending the night I left early the next morning for Dubois, Pennsylvania. Leaving Connecticut I began to hit periods of snow. A patch of ice in northern Pennsylvania almost dropped my bike in front of a semi I was passing. I spent the night in Dubois and decided to head south. I drove through Pittsburg and straight through to Louisville. After spending a few days with Betty's family, I decided to take the southern route back to California.

It was fine driving through Tennessee but as I came into Alabama I noticed people were not as friendly. People would see my California license plate and my long hair and sneer. It became difficult to engage anyone I met in conversation. At one time I was passed on a lonely highway by three men in a pickup truck who gave me a hard look. When I noticed the gun rack in the back window I began to feel I was in the middle of an Easy Rider movie and kept thinking about the scene where the rednecks shot Dennis Hopper's character with a shotgun. These feelings continued as I proceeded into Mississippi.

I was driving through northern Mississippi when I started getting low on gas. I passed the city of Meridian where I should have gotten gas but figured I would easily find a gas station a few

miles down the interstate. After about twenty miles I realized that there were no gas stations on the interstate and I would have to take a side road to a town. By then I had switched to my auxiliary tank and would soon be out of gas so I took the next available exit. After about five miles the pavement ended and became a dirt road. I knew I couldn't turn back as I would run out of gas and be stranded. Then I saw a sign saying the next town was four more miles down the dirt road and knew that was my only chance to find gas.

I soon came into a very small town where there was an old but open gas station. When I pulled in there seemed to be no one there. Next to the gas dispenser was a clipboard where people had gotten gas and left their names and the amount of gas they pumped. I honked my bikes tinny horn and out from somewhere appeared this young black attendant. He didn't say much and wouldn't make eye contact but when I opened up my tank and told him I needed regular he began to fill my tank.

I told him I was on my way back to California. He said he had heard of California but had never been further away from where we were standing than Meridian, about 30 miles away. About that time a station wagon pulled in and three large men got out. The attendant disappeared. One of the men wearing a flannel shirt and red suspenders walked around my bike. Noticing the California license plate he looked at me and said, "California huh?" I thought "Here we go." Visions of my body being lost in the backwoods of Mississippi went through my head and I got ready to fight.

"I lived in California for a while." He said. "I was doin some logging out there. Had to come home cause my momma got sick." I told him I had grown up in a logging town and had worked setting chokers and rigging for the landing skidders. He then asked what I was doing in this little town. I explained about running low on gas and that I was headed to New Orleans. He asked if I came in off the interstate? I said I had. He said that I wouldn't see any of Mississippi out on that interstate, and if I wanted to see Mississippi I should stay on the dirt road which would turn into pavement in a couple of miles and would eventually bring me to New Orleans. He finished by saying that "On this road you will see Mississippi." He finished pumping his gas, wrote something on a piece of paper and attached it to the clipboard. He and the other men got back into the station wagon and waved as they drove away. The attendant kid came out of somewhere. I paid for the gas and drove down the dirt road. As the man said, the road soon turned into pavement.

As I drove down the narrow road I was amazed by the number of people who would accost me with a smile and wave as I drove by. Everywhere I stopped there were people who were more than willing to talk. I soon came to realize that the Easy Rider fantasy that I had been perseverating on had begun before I had even started my trip, and as I began driving into the South it was I who had been suspicious and had created this false reality of eminent threat.

My perception had nearly ruined what turned out to be a wonderful experience, a much preferable reality and brought me to wonder about other preconceptions that have altered my judgment and life experience. I pledged to try to become more aware that perception alters reality and like my mother said, "Sometimes you have to look at life sideways to find the truth."