

# How the Road Built Me

John Coonrod

*We build the road, and the road builds us.*  
– Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne

Special Edition: Now with photos!

## HOW THE ROAD BUILT ME

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## HOW THE ROAD BUILT ME

*This book is dedicated to everyone who seeks justice and peace among all people.*

### Acknowledgments

In many ways this entire book attempts to acknowledge the hundreds of social activists and colleagues who have taught, inspired and guided me. The people listed in the Table of Contents are saints in my estimation, and you may wish to Google and learn more about them.

Of all the people who've guided me, Joan Holmes is the most important. Archimedes is quoted as saying "Give me a place to stand and with a lever I will move the whole world." Joan provided me both with levers and a place to stand, including a dream job that introduced me to nearly everyone else in the book. Whether I will move the whole world... Well, we'll see.

The existence of the book is due to the encouragement of my dear friend and colleague Prof. Badiul Alam Majumdar of Bangladesh. I am deeply indebted to four generous individuals who devoted time to closely read and suggest improvements to the manuscript: my wife Carol, and my friends Scott Lambros, Nicole Graham, Danielle D. Heiberg.

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Why would anyone read this book? I can think of two reasons. First, I've been amazingly fortunate to meet extraordinary 20th century pioneers for human dignity who are now (as they say in India) "no more." Once you meet them here, I think you'll be glad you did. Second, it's possible that the great currents of history that put them in my path and nudged me towards certain life choices may be nudging you in ways you may not have noticed. Reading this might lead to reflecting on those nudges.

I began this memoir because I feel a huge obligation to my many mentors who have passed away, many of whom you are unlikely to learn about online. Does anyone know they existed and made such great contributions?

What you will not find in this book is the usual fodder of memoirs: vengeful take-downs and romantic interludes. My subjects here are some of the amazing individuals who've inspired me. There are thousands of others: volunteers, community leaders, colleagues and dear friends whose stories I only wish I had the time and space to tell.

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### Dawn at the Gandhi Samadhi



*Photo: iStock*

One person I obviously never met in person, but who has dramatically influenced many of the people in this book, is Mahatma Gandhi. People who visit my home often remark on why I have 20 books about Gandhi on my bookshelf. Mohandas K. Gandhi – the Mahatma, the Great Soul – was on the Time Magazine list of the most important people of the 20th century.

Before my first trip to India in 1990, I had read about Gandhi. I watched the 1982 movie. I showed the slide show that

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accompanied that movie to numerous school and church groups. I even met people who had gone to prison with Gandhi. But I don't think I'd ever engaged with the context of Gandhi's life at a visceral level until I arrived for my first visit at the New Delhi airport in September 1990.

This was two years before India made its big swing towards modern capitalism – when it was still as anti-western as one can imagine. In 1990, the New Delhi airport was still *socialist bleak*. My 747 from New York via Amsterdam arrived at 2am, simultaneously with three or four other 747s.

All 700 or so of us walked towards the three or four immigration desks at the same time. As we approached the desks from about 20 yards, the khadhi-clad fellow who was apparently the chief immigration officer held his hand up and said to his colleagues “tea break.” They all shuffled off to a side room, for the next 90 minutes.

After they returned, and after having my papers glowered at as if they were written in Chinese rather than English (one of the 16 official languages of India) it was dawn, and I stepped into the misty, smoggy morning where I was met by Professor Manmohan Rai, devoted Hunger Project volunteer and professor of English at Delhi University.

It's quite a drive into town from Delhi airport. Even at 5am, the streets are busy, and the beggars and vendors swarm every street corner, with mothers clutching their babies, tapping on the car windows for alms.

I was foolishly thinking Manmohan would take me to a hotel. No, for my first morning in India, Manmohan took me to the Gandhi Samadhi – the memorial where one-fourth of Gandhi's ashes were interred after he was cremated. Manmohan instructed me on how to walk solemnly around the memorial's granite slab



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three times. That got us to 7am, when the Gandhi Library opened, and he introduced me to the librarians and the dusty volumes of the library which were sacred to Manmohan and would become so to me.

Then, and only then, did we proceed to the government-owned hotel. Manmohan was one of the sweetest, gentlest people I've ever met. And I will forever be grateful to him for a proper arrival in India.

—

More than 30 years later, on my 70th birthday, I was a bit embarrassed to learn that my friends see me as someone who tells lots of stories. I confess that is true. So here they are.

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## Ancestors



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*Rowena Curtright, 1894-1983*

I'm told that early childhood has an impact. Like most American baby boomers, my parents were both Depression Babies and served in different capacities during World War II. This left them both very frugal, very pro-America and always a bit fearful of the fragility of life.

My maternal grandparents lived most of their lives in the tiny town of Paris, Missouri – named for Paris, Kentucky. Paris is north of Saint Louis, near Hannibal, and they call it Little Dixie. It is inhabited by people with strong ties and the linguistic preferences of the American deep south.

Paris is the county seat of Monroe County. It was tiny when my parents met there (population 1400) and is smaller today. It has a Town Square with the County Courthouse, the Baptist Church, the Christian (now UCC) Church, and half a dozen stores. Residents call it “The Loop” and teenagers with access to cars would drive around on Friday nights “Scooping the Loops.”

Monroe County is a farming community, corn mostly. People drink water from wells with a very odd taste. As a child, I kind of liked it. I even took canteens of this water home, but I'm sure it was full of all sorts of metals that were unhealthy.

Both grandmothers were very strong women. My maternal grandmother, Rowena Bramblett Curtright, was the primary breadwinner of her family, clerking in a dress shop. As a young woman, she taught school in two different one-room schoolhouses, commuting by pony cart between them. She would meet her co-teacher midway. One day, her friend informed her that there was a new dancing teacher in Paris – Raymond Curtright. She said, “I'm going to get me that dancing teacher.”

Unbeknownst to her, her direct ancestors include Myles Standish, military captain of the Mayflower. He led military

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attacks against the indigenous population, the Nauset tribe of the Wampanoags Nation. So, as one who has grown into an activist for indigenous rights, I have some bad karma to work off!

I believe that Grandfather Ray's general economic failure shaped my mother, who was determined not to wind up in a similar position. She lettered four years in basketball at Paris High and was quite notorious for doing cartwheels down the street. In 10th grade, my father's family moved to Paris. She spotted him as a serious provider-type, and they spent the rest of their lives together. Her much younger brother was an alcoholic who was frequently in jail, and this added to her fear of male failure, generating strong pressure on me, her first son. Mom had actually wanted daughters; both my younger brother and I were to be named Jane Ellen if either of us were born female.

My father's mother, Edna Stewart, was also strong willed and famously domineering. My father wrote her letters every week of his life. I recently learned that her ancestors go back to Scotland's King Robert II. The Scottish Kings were real warlords – another bit of karma to work off I guess. I wondered why people of Royal Blood emigrated to West Virginia, until I read how one Stewart relative was beheaded, another drawn and quartered.

Mom and Edna were quite similar in dominating my dad, and that resulted in quite a bit of tension between the two women.