

# Hitchhiking for Yahweh

by William Least Heat Moon

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The thing that finally got my attention was his little aluminum suitcase. Except for the "spiritual material" consisting of typed testimonials in the satchel, everything he owned was in the aluminum case. But I didn't really see it until later.

Early afternoon: overcast, cheerless. A few miles north of Moscow I saw him hitching. The crosswind pulled his gray beard at a right angle to his face so that he looked like Curry's painting of John Brown standing before the Kansas tornado. I stopped, and the small man quickly limped up the road with a hobble that reminded me of Porfirio Sanchez. Pushing the aluminum case ahead, he climbed in, smiling, introducing himself. His name was Arthur O. Bakke. The O stood for Olaf. He spelled the last name, asked mine and how to spell it.

Now the first question from a hitchhiker never varies: "How far ya goin'?" After making certain of spellings, Arthur O. Bakke's first question was, "Do you want a free Bible course?" Oh, god, not this, I thought. "Jesus is coming," he said. Save me, I thought and started working on a rea-

son to turn back and head the other way. There's little you can do to stop a soul claimsman; even aluminum-siding salesmen run out of words before these guys. He was saying something about "God's strategy."

"I've got nothing against God's strategy, but let's not talk about it now."

He looked out the side window. "We're coming into the forest," he said. "You start to miss trees on the Palouse. And rocks—you don't see rocks or fences much there." He looked over the truck. "Do you smoke?" I said I didn't. "I don't like to ride with smokers. The Spirit's moving in you, but never mind that." He pulled out a palm-size notebook made of two pieces of linoleum. "Where did you pick me up?"

"Near Potlatch, Idaho."

He wrote that down, making sure of the spelling, then scribbled my name and the year and manufacturer of the van. When I pulled in for gas, he checked his watch and said aloud as he wrote: "'Fueling stop at Tensed, Idaho. Rain imminent.' Would you spell Tensed?"

I did. "How do you know about the rain?"

"My hip. The affliction's good for that."

"What happened?"

"Car wreck. Rolled off a mountain in a snowstorm. Jesus allowed me to almost get killed to get me into His work."

I wasn't up to asking what work he referred to.

Tensed is on the Coeur d'Alene reservation. As a young Indian scrubbed the windshield, Bakke leaned out the window.

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Having lost both his teaching job and his wife, William Least Heat Moon packed his car and crisscrossed America, following the secondary roads or blue lines on his road map. One of the people he liked best on his trip is described in this chapter, taken from *Blue Highways: A Journey Into America*, Copyright © 1982 by William Least Heat Moon. Reprinted by permission of Little, Brown and Company, in association with The Atlantic Monthly Press.

“Would you like a free Bible course?” The boy never stopped wiping, but he looked in at me. I shrugged. “Jesus is coming soon,” Bakke chirped.

The Coeur d’Alene said, faltering, “No read white man word.”

Bakke thought for a moment. The Indian finished wiping, and I followed him inside to sign the credit slip. Filling out the form in a precise hand, he said, “What’s wrong with your buddy?”

“He’s okay. Just a friendly fellow.”

“That’s what they say at the funny farm.”

Bakke and I went up the road. He talked happily about the fields, clouds, his travels. He was 58 years old and a Seventh-day Adventist. Some years ago he lost in a divorce most of what he owned and had never bothered to gather more. After recuperating from the car wreck, he went on the road to serve Jesus. Several times he said, always softly, “My! How we need Jesus!” He had a bank account in southern California and one in Virginia; otherwise, all his material goods were at his feet or wrapped around him.

“Where are you going now?” I said.

“To El Salvador.”

I thought before I spoke. “Do you understand we’re a couple of hundred miles from the Canadian border and heading due north?”

“Most certainly. I’m stopping off along the way.”

“You’re stopping off in British Columbia on the way to El Salvador?”

“No, no. I’m stopping off in Coeur d’Alene tonight on my way to Missoula, Montana. But I have to go to Virginia before I leave the country.”

Bakke knew of an Adventist church in Coeur d’Alene and figured on finding a place for the night there. It began to rain—waving sheets of water the wipers couldn’t handle. He took out his notebook to record the weather change and our arrival time. “Is Coeur d’Alene hyphenated?” I stopped at a gas station for directions to the church, and Bakke went into his routine again. “Sal-

vation’s just around the corner, brother.”

The pumpman lighted a cigarette and looked helplessly at me to see if it was a joke. “I’m already done up with the Presbyterians,” he said, retreating, watching us carefully as if Bakke had said, “Is the safe just around the corner?”

I was getting interested in the way people reacted to the offer of a free Bible course. Whatever the response, Bakke’s directness unnerved them.

“The Lord will get you off that tobacco.”

The man kept stepping backwards, reaching behind to feel where he was going. I thanked him and drove away. “Don’t think he’s ready yet,” I said. “Catch him next time through.”

Bakke took out his pad and noted the station. “Good idea.” I stopped again at a supermarket to get bread and fruit for the next day. He bought a can of beans and two bananas. As I fumbled my change, Bakke said to the checker, “How’s your faith today?”

That same uneasy smile. “Pretty good.” Then quietly, “I don’t know.” She rang up the sale, and I gave no helping shrugs.

“Jesus is coming sooner than you realize.”

“Maybe I’d better go home and clean house,” she mumbled.

The rain had eased when we got to the church, but it was still a wretched night, and I told him I would wait until he found a place. Bakke was inside some time. When he came out, the rain had stopped.

“I’ve found a home for the night,” he said. “You’re included too.”

“I’ll stay in my rig, but maybe I could wash up there.”

“We’re supposed to follow a red pickup truck. He’ll be out in a while. The service was slowed by an intoxicated man who’s seen his error. He’s still on his knees crying.”

“They’re not going to convert a drunk, are they?”

“No, no. This is just his first stop. Let’s have something to eat while we wait.” He pulled his 12 by 15 inch case onto his lap

and opened it. "I have a cheese sandwich and an apple we can share," he said. "And a corn muffin. Students at Walla Walla College gave me the food."

"I've got something here too."

Bakke said grace over the cheese sandwich, then ate quickly, paying attention to his meal. "Good cheese," he said. "Praise Yahweh." Then he went at the apple, holding it in both hands, turning it, eating from end to end the way people eat corn on the cob. He looked up once and smiled. "This is a sweet apple. I got a lift from a man and he gave it to me. I meet some beautiful people, praise the Lord."

Bakke's host tapped on the window, and we followed him to a house so new there wasn't yet a lawn. His wife had recently died, and I think he was lonely, although he seemed a little uneasy about two wayfarers coming into his living room. It was a small, orderly home without a single book visible except a phone directory, Bible, and one called *Philosophical Thoughts*, which I picked up. A clay bank.

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**"I just finished a national tour—something like the one you're on," he said "The Master impressed me to undertake the mission while the rate by Greyhound was still 55 dollars cross country, unlimited stops."**

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The men talked and reached agreement on several points:

(a) Constantine set us all back in A.D. 321 by passing a law forcing people to observe the first day of the week instead of the true Sabbath—the seventh day, Saturday.

(b) Nations are cursed because they won't tithe ten cents on the dollar, but they can't get away with it much longer.

(c) Television is a serpent both men were guilty of peeking at. Movie houses are palaces of make-believe, but they weren't guilty here.

(d) God is a He, not a She (Genesis 1:26,27).

Bakke, at the request of our host, led a kneeling prayer during which I suffered the embarrassment of losing my balance in the deep-pile shag carpet and having to lunge for the coffee table. Bakke asked for strength for us all, and I hoped he wasn't referring to my tumble.

"I sure ate that breakfast," Bakke said. "Praise Yahweh."

In some Christians of strong conviction there is a longing never to be hungry, to have no appetites; but he was one who enjoyed filling the hunger.

The morning sun cast bars of light across the road. Bakke had offered to ride with me into western Montana as he worked his way toward Missoula.

"I just finished a national tour—something like the one you're on," he said. "The Master impressed me to undertake the mission while the rate by Greyhound was still 55 dollars cross country, unlimited stops."

I felt up to it that morning, so I asked about his work.

"Jesus hitchhikes in me. That's the work. Luke 14:23."

"I don't know the Bible by numbers."

From his breast pocket he drew a small limp book marked over in ballpoint: red, green, and blue. Red markings pertained directly to deity, green to man, while the blue tended toward the "Satanic area." Bakke held his Bible softly, as if it were alive, and never did he thrust it threateningly.

He read: "'And the Lord said unto the servant, 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.'" ' Probably ten thousand people have been enrolled by Christ through me in the Voice of Prophecy Bible course."

"Enrolled by Christ? Am I talking with Jesus?"

"You're trying to make me look foolish. That's an easy thing to do. Paul says, 'We are fools for Christ's sake.' My words are my own. I don't credit myself so much. If we only knew the mind of God, oh, my!"

“Tell me how you came to believe. Is it too personal?”

“I was a jack-of-all-trades at Boeing Aircraft in Seattle, Wash. That was before Jesus claimed me, so what happened isn't important now. But my wife left me. I missed her so very much for three years.” He seemed to lose himself recollecting. After a few moments he said, “I wonder how I escaped so long. I guess God looked ahead and saw my service, like with Paul.”

Bakke opened his briefcase and took out one of his personal testimonies—a legal-size, marginless sheet dense with typed words—titled, “A Fateful Night—December 9th, 1966. True Story by Arthur Olaf Bakke, R.P.”

“You could keep this and read it,” he said with diffidence. “I'm the first to admit I don't know the mechanics of English. Don't know how to paragraph.”

“Why don't you read it aloud as we ride? Start with what R.P. stand for.”

“Royal Priest. First Peter 2:9.” He wrote the citation on his testimony and turned to the passage and read: “‘Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood’ and so on ‘that should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.’ But I've dropped the R.P. now and just use I.M.V. for International Missionary Volunteer.”

Bakke's voice, an unsubstantial contralto, rose as he read his testimony. The nub was this: He had been living alone near Wenatchee, Wash., where he made a little money selling windfall apples. One morning he loaded his Plymouth with so many boxes of windfalls that there was room only for him and a blender he used to make apple and carrot juice. He had become a vegetarian. To make his deliveries he drove west on U.S. 2 toward Everett. It was snowing in the Cascades. On the west slope of Stevens Pass, he overtook a pickup and lost control on the slippery downgrade. Here is his account:

I slid into the snowbank and crashed thru. At that split second, I called upon the name

of the LORD for help, to spare my life so I can do the work I'm doing now: Missionary Work. After rolling over and over down the hillside approximately 200 feet, an old snag about two feet thru stopped the car (I had no seat belt on—maybe if I had had one on, I'd have snapped my neck?) and spun it around right side up on an angle, nose down. I felt my hip give. Then I noticed the windshield was missing (no doubt the juicer went through it). Then I squirmed out of the

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**“My fiancee lives in El Salvador. I'm going there to get married. Her love freed me from a ten-year obsession with a gospel singer. She's 60 and can't speak English and I don't speak Spanish. . . but maybe we could witness along the Mexican border.”**

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wreckage and crawled onto the hood. I looked up and saw a flashlight up on the road and cried out for help. The man said to hold on an hour or so and he'd get help. I was so happy to be alive. I put my fingers in my mouth to keep them from freezing off. Later they came down the hill with a rope and stretcher and tied me on. They offered me a cigaret, but I told them a Christian doesn't smoke. “An ungodly man diggeth up evil; and in his lips there is a burning fire.” Proverbs 16:27.

Bakke began walking again six months later with three steel screws holding his pelvis together.

“I kept my word. I serve the Lord full time. I started witnessing in the hospital. Then in California I witnessed to the hippies at Berkeley.”

“How do you support yourself?”

“I get a Social Security disability check every month for two hundred eighteen dollars and seventy cents. And people like you contribute along the way.”

“Does the Adventist Church help out?”

“They send the free Bible courses.”

“And you keep moving all the time?”

"Sometimes I stop in a place awhile. In Virginia, outside Bowling Green, I built a tree temple on I-95. Stayed there about six months."

"What's a tree temple?"

"Like a tree house in a pine grove. I built it out of scrap lumber to about the size of your van. It was for hitchhikers—to give them shelter and the love of Jesus. This country's tough on hitchers, not like Canada. I wanted to open tree temples all over the country, but the Baptists got sore because I was teaching a different doctrine. They said the temple would attract tramps, and they got the state to come out and run me off and tear it down. That's another instance in American history of showing spite for the underdog. But it proves there are a lot of ways to beat the rat race."

"You should write a book about it."

"I'd never write about that. This world isn't worth it. Stories are fine, but salvation is everything. I'll tell you, though, I might write a book about salvation. I'd call it *Hitching for Yabweh*."

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**Hegel believed that freedom is knowledge of one's necessity, and Arthur O. Bakke, I.M.V., was a free man hindered by only his love and conviction. And that was just as he wanted it.**

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In a mountain valley full of greenness and blue water, we stopped to stretch. A historical marker explained the geology of the basin.

Bakke said, "That sign has a mistake. It says this valley was formed a million years ago, but the earth is only six thousand years old."

At Bonner's Ferry, where U.S. 2 ran a long, deep break in the Bitterroot Mountains, we turned toward Montana. I asked why he was going to El Salvador.

"My fiancée lives in San Salvador. I'm going there to get married and bring Carmen back if I can raise the money. She's a wonderful woman. Her love freed me from

a ten-year obsession with a gospel singer. She's 60 and can't speak English and I don't speak Spanish so we have to get our letters translated. But I think maybe we could witness along the Mexican border."

He took out an envelope addressed to her. Inside was a letter and a paper placemat with a map of Idaho on it furnished by the state beef association. He marked our route for her and drew heavy X's through the word BEEF and the color pictures of rump roast and prime rib."

"What's going on there?"

"Just reminding Carmen we shouldn't eat things that hurt us: beef, pork, clams, oysters, prawns. Paul says, 'Meat commendeth us not to God.'"

I said, "'Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no questions for conscience' sake.' That's Paul too. Somewhere."

"You know Scripture?"

"Here and there. I know that one from arguing with a friend who became a vegetarian for a time."

"Well, then," Bakke said and buried me in quotation. I had fired my single salvo but hadn't sunk him.

"When the Bible has so many interpretations, how do you know your view is right?"

"I don't interpret. I read the Word as it is and trust the Lord to make me understand. And another thing: understanding depends on how well you know the whole Bible and how the parts fit in."

"You seem to know all the Bible well."

"I know the New Testament better than the Old. I read four Old Testament chapters and four New Testament chapters six days a week, so I get through the whole Bible about twice a year. But the New Testament is less than a third as long so I get through it more often." Bakke turned toward me. "I saw you reading this morning. Was it the Bible?"

"The journals of Lewis and Clark. Lewis was recounting his 31st birthday, which he spent not far from here. He surveyed his life and found he'd done very little with it. He

vowed right then to live for others the way he had been living for himself."

"Some worldly books have the spirit moving in them."

We rode silently for several miles, and Bakke dozed off. A bird swooped the highway and slammed into the hood. The clunk woke him. "What was that?"

"I hit a bird."

"Why are you stopping?"

"Want to see what kind of bird it is. Or was."

He got out too. I picked it up, a warm crumpled fluff limp in my hand, its talons clenched into tiny fists. "A sparrow hawk," I said.

"Throw it away."

"There is no object so soft but what it makes a hub for the wheeled universe.' The poet, Walt Whitman, said that."

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**Despite doctrinal differences, he reminded me of a Trappist monk or a Hopi shaman. I liked Arthur. I liked him very much.**

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Bakke smiled. We drove on along the Kootenai River, and he pointed out places that would be certain death if you slid off the pavement.

"I want to ask you something personal," I said. "Everything you own—other than your testimonies and typing paper—is in that aluminum suitcase?" He nodded. "Would you show me what's in there? I'm interested in how you've reduced your goods to that box."

"Never call them 'goods.'" He opened the little case and held up the contents one by one: two shirts, a pair of pants, underwear, toothbrush and paste, bar of soap, flashlight, candle, toilet paper, a corn muffin, and a bag of Jolly Time popcorn. "I try to 'live of the gospel,' as Paul says."

"I envy your simplicity."

"Paul says, 'Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.' Colossians 3:2. The idea is to come away from

things, away from ourselves, come away from it all toward God. Buying things is an escape. It's showing what you aren't. It's loving yourself."

I was still looking at the suitcase. "You've got necessities in one box, your work in a briefcase, a creed in your shirt pocket. I admire the compression of it. I wish I could reduce it all to a couple of boxes. I like your self-sufficiency."

"Don't give me so much credit. Paul preached how pride separates us from God." He opened his small Bible and read: "'Walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness in their heart.' Ephesians 4:17."

"Maybe so, but for basic necessity, you come close to material self-sufficiency." Bakke sat quietly. "The college students you talk to, they must admire your on-the-road work, your freedom."

"I don't think many would trade places with me. Would you?"

It was a terrible question.

"I don't have your belief or purpose. But I wish I knew what you know."

"Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. If any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.' First Corinthians 8:1 and 2. Knowledge of the Lord is the knowledge worth knowing."

"Walt Whitman says, 'Be not curious about God, for I who am curious about each day am not curious about God.'"

Bakke smiled again. "Now you're going to say mortal life is a troublous shadow, aren't you? 'For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeaseth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.' James 4:14."

"I like little appeasing vapors."

"Let no man deceive himself. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.' First Corinthians 3:18, 19."

"Why should I wish to see God better than this day?' Whitman, 'Song of Myself.'"

Here's another one from a Sioux medicine man called Black Elk: 'Whatever you have seen, maybe it is for the good of the people you have seen it.'

"Errors. To know God, to know the City of God—that's the only true life."

"Maybe this is the City of God."

"How could it be? The City of God has streets paved with transparent gold."

"Sounds pretty worldly. That's the standard account in Revelation, isn't it?"

"Yes. Revelation."

We rode on in silence to Kalispell, and Bakke dozed off again. I looked at him. He seemed one of those men who wander all their lives. In him was something restless and unsatisfied and ancient. He understood that the Bible, in spite of its light, isn't a particularly cheerful book, but rather one with much darkness, and he recognized that is where its power comes from.

Yet the word he carried to me wasn't of the City of God; it was of simplicity, spareness, courage, directness, trust, and "charity" in Paul's sense. He lived clean: mind, body, way of life. Hegel believed that freedom is knowledge of one's necessity, and

Arthur O. Bakke, I.M.V., was a free man hindered only by his love and conviction. And that was just as he wanted it. I don't know whether he had been chosen to beat the highways and hedges, but clearly *he* had chosen to. Despite doctrinal differences, he reminded me of a Trappist monk or a Hopi shaman. I liked Arthur. I liked him very much.

Near Kalispell he woke up. I said, "I'll let you off at the junction of 93 so you can hitch toward Missoula."

"I could ride on with you. I know a friend in North Dakota."

"I've got to go alone, Arthur. For now, I have to go by myself. There'll be times when I'll wish for your company."

He hobbled out and came around to my window as gusts again pulled his beard sharply. We shook hands, and he said, "Carry God's blessing, brother."

"You'll be all right in this wind?"

"'For I have learned, in whatever state I am, therewith to be content.' Phillipians 4:11. Hardships are good. They prepare a man."

"I believe you."