



Traveling: A Way to Freedom, Self-Discovery, and Spiritual Awakening in Rolf Potts' Vagabonding: An Uncommon Guide to the Art of Long-Term World Travel

Pashupati Raj Koirala

Abstract

This paper explores how traveling is linked with human instinct, the love for freedom, and spiritual awakening. It highlights the fact that traveling is possible even with limited funds if a traveler has a passion to explore new things. For this purpose, Rolf Potts's book *Vagabonding* (2002), which is a collection of stories, lessons, and excerpts on traveling, is selected. The writer focuses on the idea that it is better to live a story than to tell a story. In a globalized world, it is ironic that humans are trapped, confused, and disheartened under the immense pressure of time, money, and matter. Life is so rich and varied, yet humans are confined and manipulated by the growth of modern digital technology and social media. It seems as if we are too weak to view ourselves and others clearly. Traveling is the opportunity for self-discovery and gaining new and unexpected experiences. Traveling is not only about reaching the destination and taking photographs; it is also about being open-minded, humble, and inclusive. Moreover, it is about assimilating with new surroundings, their inhabitants, and their culture. This paper makes a significant contribution by bringing out the idea that traveling is more than visiting sophisticated places and capturing them in prints and paintings. It also brings forth other dimensions to which mainstream travel literature gives little attention.

Keywords: open-minded, humble, unexpected experiences, self-discovery, spiritual awakening

Introduction

In the introduction to his book *Vagabonding*, writer Rolf Potts explains why he titled his book "vagabonding." He admits that the title may sound unorthodox, but he argues that the act of vagabonding itself is unorthodox. He explains that the term comes from the Latin-derived "vagabond," referring to a person who has no

home or job and who travels from place to place. He makes a distinction between a tourist and a traveler, stating that travelers truly see their surroundings, whereas tourists merely look at attractions. He suggests that a vagabond, by nature, is very close to a traveler.

The writer states that the act of vagabonding should not be confused with a mere vacation. The goal of a vacation is only to escape, and vacationers are determined to make their experience meet their expectations. On the other hand, while hitting the road, a vagabond is fully prepared to face challenges, both predictable and unpredictable. For a vagabond, the pleasant and unpleasant situations on the road are inseparable parts of the ongoing reality. Vagabonding is like breaking the eggshell and coming out of it. Life inside the eggshell is unaware of the greater world that surrounds us. Life in a narrow cage cannot be the whole of existence. Potts emphasizes the transformative power of travel, suggesting that the world itself is a book. Through the act of wandering, one can find clarity and meaning that ultimately leads to personal growth and enlightenment.

Theoretical Perspectives

The act of traveling can be viewed through various theoretical lenses, each offering insights into its significance for freedom and self-discovery. Scholars such as Paul Fussell in *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (1989) argue that travel is a form of social mobility, allowing individuals to experience life beyond their immediate environments. Additionally, Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* (1978) can be reinterpreted in the context of travel, highlighting how journeys can challenge preconceived notions and promote a more profound understanding of cultural dynamics.

Mary Louise Pratt, in her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), introduces the concept of "contact zones," which are social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other. In her work, she discusses how travel writing often reflects the complexities of cultural encounters and power dynamics. Through travel, individuals not only explore new landscapes but also engage with diverse perspectives, challenging their own beliefs and assumptions. As she notes, "Travel is about exploring the unknown and embracing the unfamiliar" (45). This idea emphasizes that the true essence of travel lies in its ability to foster meaningful interactions and broaden our understanding of different cultures.

Alain de Botton, in his book *The Art of Travel* (2002), explores how travel can serve as a catalyst for personal transformation and spiritual awakening. He sug-

gests that by stepping outside of familiar environments, individuals can gain new perspectives on their lives and cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves. De Botton emphasizes that travel allows for introspection, encouraging individuals to confront their desires, fears, and aspirations. He writes, “We travel for romance, we travel for architecture, and we travel to be lost” (de Botton 11). This perspective highlights that the act of traveling itself can lead to spiritual insights and a reconnection with one’s true self.

Analysis and Discussion

Rolf Potts says that those who want to be vagabonds need to have an independent mindset in order to achieve freedom in life. A vagabond never gives priority to money and is not concerned about their level of income. For a vagabond, time is more precious than money and matter. The act of vagabonding is not constrained by age, ideology, income, or demography. The writer further reveals the nature of vagabonding by stating:

Long-term travel isn’t about being a college student; it’s about being a student of daily life. Long-term travel isn’t an act of rebellion against society; it’s an act of common sense within society. Long-term travel doesn’t require a massive bundle of cash; it requires only that we walk through the world in a more deliberate way. (2)

The writer intends to say that vagabonding is a simple process of walking around the world—simply and quietly, as there is nothing to show off for a true vagabond. Vagabonding is the act of assimilating with new cultures and surroundings while hitting the road. Vagabonding involves traveling for a long period of time, which may take six weeks, four months, or two years to travel the world on one’s own. The writer defines vagabonding as an outlook on life. It is about using the benefits of the information age to increase our personal options instead of our personal possessions. According to him, “Vagabonding is about looking for adventure in normal life, and normal life within adventure. Vagabonding is an attitude—a friendly interest in people, places, and things that makes a person an explorer in the truest, most vivid sense of the world” (3).

He says that vagabonding is not a trend; rather, it is an uncommon way of looking at life. Vagabonding is about the value of time, which is our only real commodity, and it depends on how we manage to use it. Vagabonding is also about earning our freedom from the material cage of life. There is no fixed time for when and how vagabonding starts in life. It begins the moment we stop making pretenses. It begins the moment we stop procrastinating. The writer further notes that “Vagabonding is about taking control of your circumstances instead of

passively waiting for them to decide your fate” (4-5).

Vagabonding is not only a ritual of taking precautions for travel and packing suitcases. It is the ongoing process of observing and learning about people and places; moreover, it is a chance to find ourselves. The travel that we undertake is not an escape from our real life but a true discovery of it. The writer says that becoming a vagabond is not a bad decision; rather, it brings many advantages to real-life situations. The knowledge and experiences gained from vagabonding can be applied in a career, as a vagabond tends to be independent, flexible, bold, and self-sufficient—qualities required for a job seeker.

The writer believes that a person’s income level cannot determine their freedom to go vagabonding; vagabonding is possible through simplicity. What is important for vagabonding is how we use the money we have. The writer emphasizes the value of time, which he thinks is more important than money. He discusses how the rich, who have plenty of money, are poor in time. On the other hand, the downtrodden, who are poor in money, are rich in time. To show the value of time and the importance of having a simple life, the writer references religious teachings:

The ancient Hindu Upanishads refer disdainfully to that chain of possessions wherewith men bind themselves, and beneath which they sink; ancient Hebrew scriptures declare that whoever loves money never has money enough. Jesus noted that it’s pointless for a man to gain the whole world, yet lose his very self, and the Buddha whimsically pointed out that seeking happiness in one’s material desires is as absurd as suffering because a banana tree will not bear mangoes. (18)

The writer says that everyone is equally rich in time, as all humans inherit it biologically. We cannot deny the role of money for our survival, but what we need to live is time. The writer suggests we save a little money to meet our basic survival requirements, but he emphasizes spending our time lavishly. We can earn time by curbing unnecessary expenses in our daily life, and this is possible if we lead a simple life. Simplicity not only saves our money and helps us to buy our time, but it also makes us more independent to follow our passions.

In another context, the writer informs us that traditional media, as well as other forms of modern media outlets, present a distorted and partial picture of the world. He suggests that we should approach such media with skepticism, as they try to objectify real people and places. In order to know the reality and get a balanced picture of the world, it is better to experience the world ourselves, as the writer says:

Before I went to the Middle East, for example, I’d assumed from media images

that Syria was a rogue state full of humorless police informants and terrorist training camps. Once I'd drummed up the courage to actually visit Syria, however, this stereotype was shattered by the simple warmth and exuberance of the Arabs, Kurds, and Americans who lived there. (35)

The writer suggests that in order to get accurate perspectives and inspiration for our travel, we have to rely on more relevant sources of information, and vagabonding is the only option to get firsthand experience of the world. The writer says that after the first few days of vagabonding, we build up much confidence and regret not having the courage to do it years ago. Vagabonding does not know any limits, and it is not about planning and preparation in advance. Once we go vagabonding, we feel full of thrill and excitement. It is an opportunity to know the unknown, to make simple trips to the markets, to talk to people, and to develop friendships. Soon we discover that life on the road is less complicated than we had thought at home. The writer says, “. . . vagabonding is like a pilgrimage without a specific destination or goal—not a quest for answers so much as a celebration of the questions, an embrace of the ambiguous, and an openness to anything that comes your way” (66-67).

He says that if we go vagabonding with an open mind and curiosity, we will get greater pleasure and awareness. Vagabonding is also about meeting people on the road and knowing them. The kind of attitude that we take while vagabonding determines our travel experience. If we view the world with a negative attitude, the world appears to be negative and hostile. Vagabonding is not about judging other people and their culture from our own cultural perspective, as the writer says, “. . . if you continually view other people through your values, you'll lose the opportunity to see the world through their eyes” (77). He says that vagabonding is not about evaluating the rightness and wrongness of other cultures; rather, it is about better understanding them.

The writer suggests potential travelers get into adventures if they are thinking of vagabonding. By adventure, he means not a physical challenge, but a psychic one. He says that adventure is a matter of going out and allowing things to happen in a strange and new environment. He sheds light on his definition of adventure by saying:

The secret of adventure, then, is not to carefully seek it out but to travel in such a way that it finds you. To do this, you first need to overcome the protective habits of home and open yourself up to unpredictability. As you begin to practice this openness, you'll quickly discover adventures in the simple reality of a world that defies your expectations. (97)

The writer shows how adventure becomes a part of our daily life while vagabonding on the road. He further explains that minor events like traveling by a third-class train or using a squat toilet might be acts of adventure. He says that our good judgment on something may come from bad experiences. Adventure is a matter of keeping walking, whatever circumstances surround us. To know reality in a better way, a vagabond needs to observe things with innocent eyes of wonder and curiosity. Vagabonding is not just looking at things as we travel, but seeing things for what they are. Travelers truly see their surroundings even when they do not know where they are going. In this context, the writer says, “. . . vagabonding is—a discovery of reality itself” (111).

The writer emphasizes the importance of open-mindedness while vagabonding on the road. Our ideology and biased attitudes block us from knowing and learning new things that we encounter on the road. If we attach ourselves to political and other forms of ideologies, it tends to limit our vision, and we cannot understand the complex world. Ideological attachment prevents us from learning things from people who do not share our worldviews. In this regard, the writer illustrates:

If a Japanese college student tells you that finding a good husband is more important than feminist independence, she is not contradicting your world so much as giving you an opportunity to see hers. If a Paraguayan barber insists that dictatorship is superior to democracy, you might just learn something by putting yourself in his shoes and hearing him out. (112)

Open-mindedness enables us to listen and consider things properly, and it also makes us silent at the time we are going to judge what is right and what is wrong. Vagabonding is just about moving along the road silently and peacefully. Vagabonding is also about being curious and creative. It is an ongoing process of finding new things. Creativity requires the right balance between finding ourselves and losing ourselves on the road. When we begin our travel, our experience of a place will be different if we stay there for two months or two years. Our traveling does not mean that we should always be on the move. While traveling, sometimes it is better to choose an attractive place that catches our attention and settle down there for a few weeks or months in order to better know that place.

The writer points out that the deeper reasons for traveling and the curiosity for knowing things are located in our subconscious mind. We can fulfill our curiosity by involving ourselves in real-life situations, as the writer says, “Should you feel more social, you might choose to wander through your adopted hometown and figure out the inner workings of the place: how the houses are made, how the

food is cooked, how the crops are farmed” (123). When we do so, we come into contact with local people and make friendships with them. We may even learn unexpected things related to local customs, religion, and values by observing the working of things.

The writer says that personal travel is just like a pilgrimage, as travelers are not motivated by the monetary value of their traveling. This type of travel has nothing to do with politics and matter; it is just for a person’s private discovery and growth. The writer says, “. . . self-motivated travel has always been intertwined with the personal workings of the soul” (131). He further says that self-motivated travel is a way of knowing who, what, and where we are. It is a kind of disobedience to those powerful forces of society which aim to make us forget about our own existence. To enforce his argument about the spiritual side of traveling and its benefit for a self-motivated traveler, he references different theological teachings: Jesus, after all, taught that it’s pointless to look to otherworldly realms for revelation, because the kingdom of God is within you. The Buddha expressed enlightenment not as a mystical firestorm but as the disassembling of the conditioned personality. The Ecclesiastic Hebrew tradition asserts that a live dog is better off than a dead lion, because God favors what you do now. Islam asserts that the sacred is never separate from the secular, and that the world itself has spiritual lessons to teach. (131)

The writer says that it is not always possible to express and share the spiritual lessons that we learned while traveling by just using words and symbols, as symbols do not always convey the same meanings to all.

Conclusion

Rolf Potts, thus, unfolds the idea that traveling is much more than a mere activity. It is a profound journey that invites individuals to step outside their comfort zones, challenge their beliefs, and engage with the world. It encourages people to embrace long-term travel as a means to achieve freedom, self-discovery, and spiritual awakening. It gives the message that having a simple lifestyle is better than having a hectic life that only results in more greed and more confusion. It reminds us of the concept of earning to live, rather than living to earn. Time seems to be equal for all, but the point is how we are going to use it. The real joy in life is possible if we prepare for adventure and risk. Moreover, life itself is a kind of journey, and it needs an art to live. Our levels of wealth cannot determine our success in life. Through the lenses of various scholars, we can understand that the act of traveling promotes personal growth and enriches our understanding of humanity. Ultimately, the journey taken in search of freedom can lead to a deeper connection

with oneself and the world, creating lasting memories and insights that resonate far beyond the trip itself.

Works Cited

de Botton, Alain. *The Art of Travel*. Pantheon Books, 2002.

Potts, Rolf. *Vagabonding: An Uncommon Guide to the Art of Long-Term World Travel*. Crown Publishing Group, 2002.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge, 1992.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.