

MICHAEL FROME

*Rebel*  
*on the Road*  
AND WHY I WAS  
NEVER NEUTRAL

TRUMAN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Cover photo, Boundary Waters Wilderness, Minnesota 1993. All photographs from author's collection.

Cover design: Teresa Wheeler

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Frome, Michael.

Rebel on the road : and why I was never neutral / Michael Frome.

p. cm.

ISBN: 9781931112657 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN: 9781935503224 (e-book)

1. Frome, Michael. 2. Environmentalists—United States—Biography. 3. Conservationists—United States—Biography. 4. Journalists—United States—Biography. 5. Environmental protection—Press coverage. 6. Environmentalism. 7. Conservation of natural resources. I. Title.

GE56.F76F76 2007

333.72092—dc22

[B]

2007009857

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## PREFACE

I was over eighty when I found myself communicating in a college classroom with twenty- or twenty-one-year-olds, wondering how to bridge the years with something worth listening to and useful to them.

I opened by offering the supposition that it must be hard for them to realize I once was their age, but they should indeed believe that was so; further, that one day they would be my age—but first they would have to live long enough.

I acknowledged that the students could look forward to a lifetime ahead, which I could no longer do. On the other hand, I could look back on a lifetime already lived and the lessons learned from it, which they could not.

I might have impressed them by citing the *Dialogues of Plato*. In the very opening pages, at the house of Cephalus at Piraeus, the aged Cephalus remarks: “The more the pleasures of the body fade away, the greater to me is the pleasure and charm of conversation.” Socrates responds that he likes nothing better than conversing with aged men, “for I regard them as travelers who have gone a journey that I too may have to go, and of whom I ought to enquire, whether the way is smooth and easy or difficult.... Is life harder towards the end, or what report do you give of it?” Cephalus in turn allows that “old age has a great sense of calm and freedom ... he who is of a calm and happy nature will hardly feel the pressure of age.”

With due respect, I do not agree. My own life is still incomplete, regardless of my age. But in the *Dialogues* I found a theme that repeats itself again and again: “To the good poor man, old age cannot be a light burden, nor can a bad rich man ever have peace with himself.” That I feel to be a transcendent truth regarding aging and purpose. Presently I invited the students to ask me whatever they wanted, but first suggested a few guidelines on how to have a fulfilling life and career, based on my own perspective of age and my life. Here they are.

Everyone comes into the world with love and trust and an innate desire to do good works.

True success comes only from within. It has little to do with the acquisition of wealth or property or power.



The great use of a life is to create something that outlasts it.

There is no limit to what you can accomplish as long as you don't care who gets the credit.

Avoid, if possible, getting involved in issues of personality, since you will have it tough enough dealing with issues of principle.

Have faith, not necessarily in yourself, but in the goals you have chosen for yourself.

"If you haven't been lost, you haven't navigated." So I was taught on my first day in navigation school early in World War II. That is another way of telling someone to learn from mistakes, to be patient and not to get hung up by them. I advised the students to keep loving themselves, no matter what, especially since they would have to love themselves in order to love others.

Cultivate friends. Make friends on the way up because you will need them on the way down. And if you don't go to your friends' funerals, well, then, they won't go to yours.

Following the class, I found a lot more that should be said in order to make a life worth living. I might have told them about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was born to an educated, influential upper-class German family in 1906 and joined the faculty of Berlin University as a theologian in 1930. Three years later he denounced Hitler and Nazism; he wrote against compromise in the church, defining "cheap grace" versus "true grace." Consequently, he was forbidden to write, teach, lecture, or make speeches.

He was arrested in April 1943, but even then pursued his principle, using his prison time for reflection on religious thought and becoming involved, from his jail cell, in the abortive plot to assassinate Hitler in July 1944. After imprisonment in Buchenwald, he was hanged at Flossenbürg April 9, 1945. However, in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, published after his death, Bonhoeffer left challenging words certain to long outlast him:

Something which puzzles me and seems to puzzle many others as well is, how quickly we forget about a night's bombing. Even a few minutes after the all-clear, everything we were thinking about while the raid was on seems to vanish into thin air. With Luther a flash of lightning was enough to alter the whole course of his life for years to come. What has happened to this kind of memory today? Does it not explain why we sit so lightly to the ties of love

and marriage, of friendship and loyalty? Nothing holds us, nothing is firm. Everything is here today and gone tomorrow. Goodness, beauty, and truth, however, and all great accomplishments need time, permanence, and memory, or else they deteriorate. The man who has no urge to do his duty to the past and to shape the future is a man without a memory, and there seems to me no way of getting hold of such a person and bringing him to his senses.<sup>1</sup>

That is why I am now recounting my life's adventures, and what I've learned from them, and what I have tried to do. I should also mention at this point a message from C. S. Lewis. In *Surprised by Joy*, he wrote that he was blessed while growing up because his father had no car. Although most of his friends were better off and sometimes took him for rides, he himself had not been given what he called the deadly power of rushing about. Consequently he measured distances based on standards of walking on his two feet. He came to believe the truest and most horrible claim for modern transportation is that it conquers and annihilates space. That, of course, is the essential rationale behind planes, trains, and automobiles—the faster the better. But Lewis took another view of mechanized speed.

It annihilates one of the most glorious gifts we have been given. It is a vile inflation which lowers the value of distance, so that a modern boy travels a hundred miles with less sense of liberation and pilgrimage and adventure than his grandfather got from traveling ten. Of course if a man hates space and wants it to be annihilated, that is another matter. Why not creep into his coffin at once? There is little enough space there.<sup>2</sup>

In this same vein, I think of what Thomas Merton, in *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander*, called "The Time of the End," which he described as "the time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power, and acceleration."

That is civilization in the twenty-first century. It's not only distance, but also sound—or perhaps I should say noise—the noise of motors and machines, and voices on the radio, television, home telephones, and cell phones, in the classroom, and at conferences on how to generate more volume, quantity, power, price, and profit.

It is impossible to escape it, even in the wildest, remotest reaches of nature. I (or C. S. Lewis) might claim nature symbolizes stability in an unstable age, and no one can justify his presence in nature unless he goes there on his own power, for the simple reason that if one enters in a machine, then he relegates himself to being a cog in the machinery. And yet, off-road vehicles and all-terrain vehicles—snowmobiles, dune buggies, motor scooters, motorcycles, airboats, hovercraft—“make the impassable passable.” They “go through hell and high water—and everything else in between.” They contaminate streams and destroy soils and render an area unsuitable for camping, fishing, and wildlife. The user feels a sense of power, excitement, and control, but the focus is in riding the machine as an end in itself, rather than on nature or scenery. He is unmindful of shattering silence on a wintry day or night, of polluting clean air with exhaust fumes. The presence of the machine signals that nature has lost its defenses. But isn't that the point in the Time of the End?

In this same vein, I opened a speech at the Northwest Wilderness Conference in Seattle on October 8, 1994, with the following words:

Everything is green. Everything is waiting and still. Slowly things begin to move, to slip into their place. Groups and masses and lines tie themselves together. Colors you had not noticed come out, timidly or boldly. In and out, in and out your eye passes. Nothing is crowded; there is living space for all. Air moves between each leaf. Sunlight plays and dances. Nothing is still now. Life is sweeping through the spaces. Everything is alive. The air is alive. The silence is full of sound. The green is full of color. Light and dark chase each other. Here is a picture, a complete thought, and there another and there.... There are themes everywhere, something sublime, something ridiculous, or joyous, or calm, or mysterious. Tender youthfulness laughing at gnarled oldness. Moss and ferns, and leaves and twigs, light and air, depth and color chattering.... You must be still in order to hear and see.

I was quoting from the journal of Emily Carr, written while sketching and painting her powerful impressionistic portraits and landscapes of totem poles, and of trees, tree trunks, and wild forests of British Columbia. Emily believed the glories she found and felt were derived from spiritual sources. But then, creative persons forever seek the primeval as source material

and inspiration. Literature, poetry, and science, as Emerson wrote, all are homage to the unfathomed secrets of nature.

I have asked myself many times how I managed to make the journey, starting as a boy in the crowded, noisy city streets of the Bronx and ranging as far as the wildness of the Northwest, and how I presumed to speak with expertise about silence and Emerson's homage to nature. And yet, wherever I am, when I am still and listen, I hear the chorus of thrushes, thunder of waterfalls, mist rising from a mountain meadow at twilight, and ancient voices riding the breezes of night.

But the transcendence of noise is only one way the world has changed in my lifetime. In 2003, I read that Jessica Lynch would receive an advance of one million dollars for a book about her heroics in Iraq. Jessica was the nineteen-year-old Army private captured when her truck took the wrong turn. That much is true, but the Pentagon wrote the rest of the script, starring Jessica in a daring rescue from her hospital prison. As the world saw on video, U.S. commandos broke down doors, entered with guns drawn, and dramatically carried away the prisoner in the dead of night with helicopter and armored vehicle backup. Then the truth came out: the Iraqi guards had long fled, Jessica was well cared for, the doors were not locked, and the hospital staff did not resist.

That much can be expected of a military machine merchandising a war. It was also accepted that Jessica's book would be "cowritten" by Rick Bragg, who had earlier been suspended by, and then resigned from, the *New York Times* for taking credit for reporting on an assignment an intern did for him. He claimed it was common practice, though the *Times* said he violated a rule appropriately called "dateline integrity."

The worst part of the story, what I find hardest to believe, is that Jessica's book was published by Alfred A. Knopf, a firm that built its reputation on memorable, world-class literature. As it happens, I knew Alfred A. Knopf, the founder and president of the firm. He was courtly, articulate, and good-humored. In his later years, he became interested and involved in conservation work and in the *New York Herald/Tribune* reviewed with kind words my book about national forests.

That was nearly fifty years ago. Between then and now a handful of mammoth private organizations have swallowed up the independent, smaller firms—Knopf included—to dominate the media. Now profit is the primary paradigm. The creed is greed and nothing in our culture seems to be exempt.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I began serious work on this book early in 2003 when my wife June and I rented an apartment for six weeks at Zihuatanejo, Mexico. We set aside one room as an office where I was able to work undisturbed through a mass of materials I had brought along. This led to a first draft and in time through three revisions.

Perhaps the most helpful comments and critique in the early stages came to me from Donald Edward Davis, professor at Dalton State College, Georgia (author of *Where There Are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Mountains*), who showed me how to take myself more seriously as an environmental advocate. My close friend Alfred Runte, historian and author, gave significant encouragement from the very beginning until ultimate publication. Other academics and scholars who reviewed the work at one stage or another, or provided helpful input, include Ben Bagdikian, former dean of journalism, University of California at Berkeley; Richard Behan, professor emeritus and former dean of forestry, Northern Arizona University; Scot Danforth, University of Tennessee Press; James R. Fazio, professor of natural resources, University of Idaho; Hugh Iltis, professor emeritus, University of Wisconsin; and Carl Reidel, professor emeritus, University of Vermont.

Many friends and colleagues in the environmental field helped me considerably, notably Stewart Brandborg, former executive director of the Wilderness Society; Brock Evans, former executive director and now president of the Endangered Species Coalition; Paul Pritchard, president of the National Park Trust; Mack Prichard, chief naturalist of Tennessee; Mark Peterson, executive director of the Minnesota Audubon Society; Scott Silver, director of Wild Wilderness; and Ted Williams, editor-at-large of *Audubon* magazine.

My niece, Annette Fromm, folklorist and museum director, and her brother, Peter Fromm, keeper of the family photo archive, helped in recapping early years. The late Howard Silverberg and his wife, Jeanne Dresser, helped with recollection of college days (and nights). With reference to my wife's early years, I was aided by her sister, Audrey Light, and her husband, Robert

Light. I received important help from my children, William C. Frome and Michele L. Frome, and from June's children, Fjaere Nilssen-Mooney, Kjersti Nilssen, and Carl Nilssen.

I am grateful to Glenn Walters of Port Washington, Wisconsin, my friend and technical advisor, for guidance in the use of my computer; Lisa Friend, of Bellingham, Washington, who has indexed my books with care and concern for the past twenty years, and to the staff of Truman State University Press for personal and professional interest in making this book happen. I wrote in the preface that academic presses are staffed with competent, conscientious people, and they care. Truman State University Press has been the exemplar.

Above all, I am indebted to my wife, June Eastvold, who held my hand and cheered me on the way and *all* the way.

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