Revelations of an Angelheaded Hipster: Jack Kerouac’s Compassionate Beat

Bret Olson

Honors Thesis
He would not look at her scars. Ray Smith, of Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*, was not ready for this step. He came down from the Matterhorn spiritually high—wasted on the ecstasy of it all—and he “felt like a new man,” for he was a new man (DB 108). He was a man prepared to run away into the wilderness, prepared for the Apocalypse, prepared for what Kerouac calls the “Rucksack Revolution”:

Thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of them Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason. (DB 97)

But Ray was not prepared to see Rosie’s scars. He was not prepared to open his eyes to the suffering of this world, nor was he ready to allow his own wounds—real and metaphoric—to be opened. His hope for a “Rucksack Revolution” inadequately prepares him to acknowledge the reality of Rosie’s suicide attempt, for it is but a hopeful vision of things to come—a form of childlike escapism from this all-too real world. When Ray faces the reality of a sick friend’s needs the vision of revolution passes thus, pointing to the insufficiency of visionary quests as an ultimate destination on the road of life.

Yet, Ray with reluctance acquiesces to Cody Pomeray’s request to watch after Rosie and forces himself to look at Rosie’s scars:

“Yes.” I had seen her arms, which were all cut up.

“She tried to slash her wrists with some old knife that doesn’t cut right. I’m worried about her. Will you watch her while I go to work tonight?” [Cody asks]

---

1 Throughout this paper I will be using DB to represent *Dharma Bums*, DA to represent *Desolation Angels*, and OTR to represent *On The Road*. 
“Oh man—”

“Oh you, oh man, don’t be like that. You know what it says in the Bible, ‘even unto the least of these…”’

“All right but I was planning on having fun tonight.” (DB 109)

Is having “fun,” planning “fun,” and experiencing the essence of “fun” Ray Smith’s only goal in life? Is this escapism the ultimate form of existence? Is Jack Kerouac, author and creator of this pleasure-seeking, naïve, too-scared-to-look-at-the-reality-of-suicide scars-character nothing more then a pleasure-seeker himself? Is Kerouac’s primary function in both life-purpose and authorship to perpetuate a lifestyle dedicated to “having fun tonight” or does he have deeper purpose?

Who is Jack Kerouac? The Academy is split on the man and his mission. Some claim that he is this thrill-seeking, hedonistic, burned-out bum of the Beat Generation—nothing more that a drunk Benzedrine-addicted hep-cat who had it all wrong—a writer more infamous than famous. Written in the 1950s and 60s, his books could be construed as a reflection of this wild life of the “Beat” counterculture. Norman Mailer, in 1974, asserted, in *Advertisements for Myself*, that Jack Kerouac ‘lacks discipline, intelligence, honesty and a sense of the novel’” (quoted in Dardess 411). Truman Capote, in the February 9, 1959 edition of the *New Republic*, said, “That isn’t writing at all, it’s typing” (Bartleby.com).

---

2 According to Stephen Prothero, ‘What bothered the critics most about the beats was their negativity, ‘Life claimed they were at war with everything sacred in Eisenhower’s America.’ The Nation dismissed the beats as ‘naysayers;’ Playboy called them ‘nihilists’…Prodhoretz grouped them with Nazis and Hell’s Angels. ‘The Bohemianism of the 1950’s is hostile to civilization; it worships primitivism, instinct, energy, ‘blood,’” he wrote. ‘This is a revolt of the spiritually underprivileged and the crippled of soul…”’

On the other hand, ‘‘Beat,’ Kerouac asserted, stood not for ‘Beat Down’ but for ‘beatific’…‘I want to speak for things,’ he explained. ‘For the crucifix I speak out, for the Star of Israel I speak out, for…Bach I speak out, for sweet Mohammed I speak out, for Buddha I speak out, for Lao-tse and Chuang-tse I speak out”’ (Prothero 206-207).
On the other side of the spectrum, we find a Kerouac hailed as a saint of sorts—a mountain top mystic detaching himself from toxic American culture like a 20th century Thoreau. So writes Jim Christy, whose short biography chronicles the last ten years of Kerouac’s life:

Why weren’t the lives of millions of people throughout the world changed by reading Robert Lowery and John Clellon Homes? It is not merely because Kerouac is a superior writer. He was primarily a religious writer. Not an explicator or apologist for Christianity, nor an obvious didact like Thomas Merton, but, far more powerfully a writer whose message is one of compassion, and almost the entire body of his work is suffused with religious mysticism. The writer he most resembles is not Thomas Wolfe, or James Joyce, or any others he’s compared to, but the Bishop of Hippo himself, St. Augustine.3

To polarize Kerouac—Sinner, Saint—is to lose the important meaning in his writing. By polarizing him we can be tempted to ignore important questions, which are raised when looking closely at the lives of the characters in Kerouac’s books. Why is it that Jack Duluoz of Desolation Angels cannot sustain the visionary quest he achieves on Desolation peak? Why does Sal Paradise’s transcendent vision of Market Street, in On The Road, dissolve into the sites and smells of the local eateries? Why does Ray Smith in Dharma Bums consider himself “an oldtime [sic] bhikku in modern clothes wandering the world” (DB 5)? Why are these stories told to begin with? Is it to show off how many

---

3 Christy is correct in connecting Kerouac to St. Augustine in that the texts have the expressed purpose of telling the former life of the narrator and opening the reader’s eyes to a new way of living. There is, however, a distinction between Augustine and Kerouac. Augustine is Augustine on the page. He does not use character to tell his story. Kerouac does use fictional characters to tell a story, and thus, we cannot directly connect Kerouac to the narrators in his stories. Sal Paradise, Jack Duluoz, and Ray Smith are telling their own stories. They are fictionalized characters whose stories are not the exact autobiographical events of Kerouac’s own life.
women Dean Moriarty slept with in *On The Road*? Is it to depict Japhy Ryder’s expert mountain climbing, or is it to show us Rosie’s suicide scars?

Upon looking closely we find an author whose life and literary style cannot be categorized as either wholly sinner or saint. In his writing, the lives and faith quests of his characters combine both these aspects as an amalgamated unit. Therefore, placing Kerouac exclusively in one category or another is to miss the deeper meaning found in asking why, in life and as an author, he and his characters had hedonistic tendencies *as well as* spiritual and visionary depth?

Ben Giamo, in his book *Kerouac the Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester*, helps to complicate this polarization by giving us a richer understanding of Kerouac’s spirituality. Giamo’s main objective in his book is to “chronicle and clarify the various spiritual quests undertaken by Kerouac” (Giamo, xix). However, as he states in his closing chapter:

We must take the spiritual quest on Kerouac’s own terms...for it was lived (embodied) and provoked into action by taking the following question to heart:

*How does one beat time?*

For Kerouac, the mundane and existential burden of being in time prompted metaphysical preoccupation and incited the spiritual desire to transcend (or sidestep) both calendar and clock...that enormous burden of time ticking off our mortality; and *his quest sought to evade or surmount the solemn awareness of such human matters* (Giamo 197, emphasis mine)

Thus, Giamo suggests that the ultimate goal of a spiritual quest is to escape time—escape time-locked reality. Kerouac’s characters, rather than engaging the present moments of
life, are striving for a way to get out of reality. By endeavoring to escape reality and have transcendent visions, Kerouac’s characters have no motivation to stay within the world and actively engage it.

Accordingly, Giamo’s interpretation of Kerouac’s spiritual focus, quest, and success bases itself in what I will call passive transcendence. It centers within this attempt to answer the question: Can Kerouac’s characters beat—transcend—time? With this definition, in order for these characters to succeed they must try to step outside of reality. Therefore, for Giamo, a successful spirituality is attained and completed when characters experience visions or constantly run on the road in search of a metaphysical escape.

I, however, do not believe the spiritual focus, or success, of Kerouac’s characters revolve around attempts “to evade or surmount” anything like time or mortality (Giamo 197). It is true that Kerouac’s characters experience visions and states of ecstasy, which, perhaps, supports the idea of passive transcendence. They do experience metaphysical, if not mystical, “preoccupation and…spiritual desire to transcend (or sidestep) both calendar and clock” (Giamo 199). They revel in Rucksack Revolutionary visions of a changed future, but this does not mean that they are succeeding along religious and spiritual lines. This does not mean that the visions by themselves provoke a positive and compassionate response or incite action that will make these changes occur.

I claim that in these instances of mystical vision and ecstasy Kerouac’s characters are being passive and inactive. This inactivity—lack of engagement in the world—is a failure. Observe, however, I am not claiming that a person’s spiritual life fails if it involves ecstatic experience. Rather, it is what a character does with this experience that
determines their success or failure. In these moments of ecstasy they are provided a chance to act and respond with compassion to the immediacy of scarred humanity.

Problems inevitably arise, however, when characters attempt to run, evade, or elude the pain and scars of life. Difficulties occur when these people do not take responsibility for the life they experience. When confronted with these situations they can choose to flee from life or choose to engage it. If they run, physically or mentally, they fail like Ray Smith does in wanting to have fun rather than look after Rosie. They fail, by either escaping into the mountains or into themselves in the naive hopes of a visionary Rucksack Revolution. Consequently, passive transcendence is the only thing Ray and others have the chance to attain if they do not take responsibility for life. Thus, they are left with a moment of failure.

Instances of failure, however, do not imply a completely failed faith life. I hope to show that Kerouac perceives life itself as a spiritual journey. As a journey, characters will experience many facets of existence. They will undergo moments of joy, despair, confusion, clarity, vision, hedonism, fundamentalism, depression, and ecstasy. All these instances provide characters with a choice and if they choose to engage the world, they succeed. This success comes from opening their eyes to the problems, joys, woes, bliss, wounds, and scars of life. In seeing, they can choose some form of compassion. Thus, through Kerouac’s characters—Sal Paradise, Dean Moriarty, Japhy Ryder, Jack Duluoz, Ray Smith, Cody Pomeray, and a slew of other beat, minority, crippled, burned out people—and their experiences, Kerouac leads us on an investigation into the psychology of a homegrown, spiritual pilgrimage of faith. These characters discover
many occasions for choice, which can either lead to spiritual growth in successful
decision or spiritual decline in failed choice.

Life-faith, therefore, can be lived in a successful way or in a failed way—on the
road or on a mountain (metaphors for success and failure). A failed journey of faith
leaves the spiritual quester on the mountaintop of loneliness, inactivity, and passivity. A
successful life-faith, however, occurs when characters do not settle for a particular dogma
or belief, but actively create and force themselves to open their eyes to the suffering of
this world.

In *On The Road (OTR), Desolation Angels (DA), and Dharma Bums (DB)*, we find
stories where life-faith is not nailed down, defined, or possessed, but lived, experienced,
and searched for with fear and trembling⁴—with diligent, sometimes, anguished resolve.
By embracing the processes of becoming⁵ they gain an active life-faith and love-
compassion for mankind. A worthwhile life-faith, then, is molded, experienced, and lived
actively by looking at the scarred people of this world. Characters must choose to act
“despite the dread and anguish…that threaten to stall [them] in [their] tracks… [They]
must take responsibility… [They] must create the world anew” by living compassionately
(Cotkin 3).

A successful faith, therefore, is not based on passive transcendence. It does not
involve sitting and waiting for visionary-mystical-spiritual experiences. It does not

---

⁴ "Fear and Trembling” of course alludes to the work by Soren Kierkegaard—Christian existentialist of the
19th century. This word pairing comes from one of St. Paul’s epistles, where he encourages people to “work
out your own faith, with fear and trembling.” Kierkegaard uses it in part to describe the feelings of dread
and anxiety in this life and the need to choose action and respond with faith.

⁵ The process of becoming is an idea set out by Soren Kierkegaard. It is explained in George Cotkin’s
book *Existential America*. Both Cotkin and Kierkegaard have been greatly helpful in giving an
understanding to the concepts of Existentialism I see in Kerouac’s work. The existential underpinnings are
mainly loneliness, collapse, despair, angst, and a choice out of this metaphoric pit, thus resulting in
compassionate and active living.
involve attempts to “meditate [a] scene [of life] away” like Duluoz does in *Desolation Angels (DA 95).* It is only through active choices, made against all despair and angst, that one gains an active and successful life-faith (faith life). It is action in response to the suffering of this world, action in response to those who “[try] to slash [their] wrists with some old knife that doesn’t cut right,” and action in confessing, as the authorial Ray later does, “I didn’t know anything, I was just a dumb young kid and impractical fool who didn’t understand the serious significance of this very important, very real world” (DB 111). It is in living, responding, and acting compassionately to these “cut arms,” these scars of life, that makes or breaks Kerouac’s concept of faith.

The Being of Perpetual Motion and the Quest for IT

What then, does successful activity and movement mean for Kerouac? Ben Giamo asks us to “think of Dean Moriarty, the hero of *Road,* [as the] lost western frontiersman turned urban cowboy—brakeman always on the make—a wild roaming being of perpetual motion” (Giamo 22). This perpetual motion, this constant activity, is the metaphorical success of the road. Yet, movement—motion in and of itself—does not mean responsible action and successful choice within this realm.

Dean is active, but what does he do with this activity? Narrator Sal Paradise says that Moriarty always bounces from person, to location, to event, running like he will never stop. Sal admires his fast movement during a footrace and writes, “As we ran I had a mad vision of Dean running through all his life just like that…But nobody could go as fast as he could and that was the truth” (OTR 143). This perpetual motion places Dean and his friend Sal on separate paths, for Dean’s motion is his own. Dean acknowledges
he lives on a different path—a road of go go go, a different spiritual journey if you will—a much faster one that Sal tries to keep up with, but cannot.

Therefore, Sal must find a personal rhythm, speed, and beat on his own spiritual path. Dean, knows this and asks Sal, “What’s you road man? —holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road. It’s an anywhere road for anyone anyhow. Where body how?” (OTR 239). Dean seems to understand that he and his friends have a choice of their own unique roads. Yet, what does Dean choose to do on his path? His perpetual motion does help him create an individual journey, but whether a life-faith of compassion develops on this path is questionable.

Dean is restless—urgent—not calm and collected. He is the very personification of restlessness, “a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy” (Giamo 22). His restiveness echoes in Carlo Marx’s answer to Paradise’s question about the evening:

The schedule is this: I came off of work a half-hour ago. In that time Dean is balling Marylou at the hotel…At one sharp he rushes from Marylou to Camille—of course neither one knows what’s going on—and bangs her once…Then he comes out with me—first he has to beg with Camille, who’s already started hating me—and we come here and talk till six in the morning… [however] he’s pressed for time. Then at six he goes to Marylou—and he’s going to spend all day tomorrow running around to get the necessary papers for their divorce (OTR 38).

Here, however, we find actions based within selfishness. He sleeps with one woman then the next, “neither [of which] knows what’s going on,” and he is always “pressed for time,”—his own time. Dean just keeps going, and going, and going: “he keeps rushing out to see the midget auto races…he jumps and yells, excited” (OTR 37).
Along with Dean’s aforementioned choices within a given evening, Sal has a mystical vision of Dean that points to the insufficiency of the life-faith decisions Moriarty makes:

I had a vision of Dean, a burning shuddering frightful Angel, palpitating toward me across the road, approaching like a cloud, with enormous speed, pursuing me like the Shrouded Traveler on the plain, bearing down on me…I saw his wings; I saw his old jalopy chariot with thousands of sparkling flames shooting out from it;

*I saw the path it burned over the road; it even made its own road* and went over the corn, though the cities, destroying bridges, drying rivers. It came like wrath to the West…Everything was up, the jig and all. Behind him charred ruins smoked.\(^6\)

(OTR 246-247, emphasis mine)

Sal sees how Dean’s selfish and self-absorbed choices, i.e. his disregard for the feelings of both Marylou and Camille, burn and make roads of their own. These are not thriving life-giving roads, but rather ones that lay waste to the landscape of his life. They leave his surroundings in utter ruins.

For Kerouac then, being successfully active means, as Dean says, creating “an anywhere road for anyone anyhow” (OTR 239, emphasis mine). It means, as Cotkin says, people “must take responsibility…[and] must create the world anew” for themselves and others (Cotkin 3). Dean’s road is a yes yes yes road that never stops. In his activity he burns new destructive “holy boy” and “madman roads” (OTR 218). Yet, his perpetual

---

\(^6\) This vision has a striking resemblance to the fiery apparition the prophet Ezekiel saw Old Testament:
As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing continually…In the middle of the living creatures there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro…the fire was bright and the lightning issued from the fire. The living creatures darted to and fro, like a flash of lightning…for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels,” (NRSV Ezekiel 1:13-14, 21).
motion, in and of itself, does not lead to compassionate decisions or good responses to a hurt world.

On their own roads, Kerouac’s characters thus have a choice in how to act both physically and mentally. The physical roads offer a space for mental action and a “necessary link and life-line to the busy, restless, energetic multiplicities of the too-worn yet still possible world” (Giamo 22). Successful movement, then, requires both watching over the Rosies of the world while not complaining in the process. Yet, this physical place of operation is useless if actions—motions by themselves—do not help others. Regardless, all must choose a road and then must use that road.

Dean sees that he must choose, but repeatedly fails at empathetic living. Dean moves on a road that is no one else’s. He “had not slackened his speed; he took the curvy corndales of Iowa at a minimum of eighty and the straightaway 110 as usual” (OTR 219, 221). He screams, “Yes! You and I Sal, we’d dig the whole world with a car like this, because man the road must eventually lead to the whole world” (OTR 218). For the road does lead to the whole world, and thus Kerouac shows the power in leaving the choice of road to the spiritual quester.

As a result of this choice, Dean, Sal, and others move searching and rolling on the roads of America, moving for the sake of motion itself, running and moving their bodies away from reality and thus missing the decisions within the experiences of now. They search for an end. They search for what Dean calls “IT,” capital “IT” not lowercase “it,” and thus they fail to act compassionately to their scarred neighbors (OTR 118).

This concept of IT is crucial to understanding the spirituality of Kerouac. IT, intentionally, is left ambiguous. Kerouac’s characters do not have a full understanding of
what IT is. A conversation between Sal and Dean about IT, and the events of an evening at their friend Rollo’s house, point to the complications of having this ill-defined thing as an end-all goal in a spiritual life-faith:

I want to be like him [Dean says]. *He’s never hung up, he goes every direction,* he lets it all out, he knows time, and he has nothing to do but rock back and forth. 

*Man, he’s the end!* You see, if you go like him all the time you’ll finally get it.”

“Get what?” [Sal asks]

“IT! IT! I’ll tell you—now no time, we have no time now.” (OTR 118, emphasis mine)

Dean thinks Rollo is IT, or has IT. He believes that Rollo has attained an end of some sort through means of “spastic” movement (OTR 118). Yet, here again we find that Dean is selfishly absorbed, for, as usual, he is crunched for time and cannot define IT for Sal.

Kerouac, here, takes the opportunity to reveal how IT is involved in a successful life-faith for his characters. Giamo describes IT as the “ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being” (23). However, what is pure being? For Giamo, pure being is “a form of ecstasy,” which “spins the wheels of free, spontaneous, fleeting, hedonistic existence” (23, emphasis mine). If this is a correct definition for IT, then, we are left with characters questing for passive transcendence, hoping for Rucksack Revolutionary escapism, ecstatic feeling, or mystical experiences that break them out of time and space.

IT, as an end, cannot complete life-faith, for feelings of ecstasy are not *pure* being, only a part of being. Visions of Revolution are good and well if compassionate action is taken in the here and now to make them a reality. I claim that pure being means

---

7 Notice his name is Rollo—this is not a mere pun—but a reference to rolling down the road, the way of embracing the process of becoming.
embracing the process of becoming, acting with love, watching after Rosie and acknowledging her pain.

To understand, and to clarify this ambiguity, one must realize that for Kerouac there is a good IT and a bad IT. IT is bad when perceived as a mystic end. IT is good, when perceived as compassionate choices, decisions, and engagement in the world. How is this distinction actually made in the text? It is made by the voice of the narrator, for Sal is writing from a future prospective—down the road, looking back and reflecting about years past.

The use of the narrator as storyteller, re-telling the tale of his life, is a crucial part to understanding what I claim as Kerouac’s concept of a successful faith-life in these novels.\(^8\) Sal looking back on his life, presents the idea of IT originally as an attainable entity. This is what younger Sal believed. Both he and Dean do not originally understand IT as a state of being, existence, action and empathy within time—the good IT—but rather something they must strive for because of their lack of IT—the bad IT.

Thus, these men endeavor on multitudes of road trips, moving for the sake of moving, in hopes that they will attain this strange unexplainable end goal. Rollo is just another instance of failed empathetic activity. Like Dean, he is perpetually driven by the bad-IT. This may be why Dean is so infatuated with him. He is full of vibrancy. Yet he too has moments of selfishness:

He had more books then I’d ever seen in all my life…He played Verdi operas and pantomimed them in his pajamas with a great rip down the back. *He didn’t give a damn about anything.* He is a great scholar who goes reeling down the New York

\(^8\) Later, I will go into much greater detail about how the re-telling of the narrator’s story in each of the books has significant impact on the development of a successful life-faith.
water front...shouting. He crawls like a big spider through the streets. His excitement blew out of his eyes in stabs of fiendish light. He rolled his neck in spastic ecstasy. He lisped, he writhed, he flopped, he moaned, he howled, he fell back in despair. He could hardly get a word out, he was so excited with life.

(OTR 118, emphasis mine)

Rollo and Dean do not “give a damn” because of their shouting and spider-like movement through the streets of New York and the roads of America (OTR 118). They are selfish and flawed. Rollo “lisped, he writhed he flopped, he moaned, he howled, he fell back in despair.” (OTR 118). Does Rollo act against this despair, does he choose to truly care about something or some one, or does he move his body until he cannot speak? Does Dean?

Rollo, Dean, and Sal do not actively embrace the good IT of compassion, but rather search for the bad IT—the forgotten “bliss of childhood,” or the pearl—the ephemeral IT—handed to them "somewhere along the line" (Giamo 23). Notice, however, Sal wants this pearl—bad IT—to be handed to him without any effort. He soon learns that the pearl does not manifest itself by passive transcendence and writes, “[Dean] and I suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there,” (OTR 129, italics mine). The pearl he refers to is the false end-IT that they seek. See, however, that when one looks at this scene from the

---

9 An old prophet at the end of OTR calls Sal to “go moan for man” (OTR 289). Moaning, which I will explain later, is essential for a successful faith. Rollo moans, but does he moan compassionately?

10 The word howl is also the title of Allen Ginsberg’s famous poem read at the sixth street gallery in San Francisco in the late 1950’s.

11 By defining IT as the experience of the present moment, the title of Kerouac’s book On the Road, gains a deeper spiritual depth. With this definition the title no longer alludes to a multitude of cross-country road trips, but the importance of embracing the journey. Being on the road becomes more about the process, the existence, and the choices, as opposed to a quest for something obscure at the end of the journey.
viewpoint of the Sal as narrator, we learn that to get the pearl Dean and Sal have to open the shell themselves. They have to break into the protective covering and force the pearl to reveal itself. They have to choose to act. They are not recipients but active participants in getting the pearl. They have to crack the armored shell of ego.

Kerouac, thus, uses Sal’s passive desire for the gifted-bad-IT-pearl to show the futility of searching for passive transcendence. He uses the image of cracking the oyster shell of ego to show the value of looking at the scars of humanity and participating in the compassionate good-IT-moment of the present. By writing about the multiplicity of road trips Dean and Sal take, the authorial Sal shows their naïve hope that mobility, mere activity (hedonistic or holy), will bring to them a reality lying just out of their grip.¹²

**Ecstatic Visionary Experience**

In all three of these novels, attempting to beat time and gain the bad-IT is the goal of these road trips. Kerouac’s characters do, however, experience momentous states of ecstasy, encounter the numinous reality that lies just beyond their grips, step out of time, beat the cosmos, and have visionary experiences that all appear to be successful forms of passive transcendence. They appear to be succeeding in gaining the bad-IT. However, his characters have the choice of whether to try and attain that state of ecstasy again or take what they experience and apply it to life. It is what they do with these events that lead them on either a path of spiritual growth or one of decline.

---

¹² At one point, Sal receives a prophecy from one of his hipster friends Carlo, who says, “The balloon won’t sustain you much longer. And not only that, but it’s an abstract balloon. You’ll all go flying to the West Coast and come staggering back in search of your stone,” (121). These trips come to bad ends. The visions are fleeting, the kicks exhaust him, and as Carlo says, they will be coming “back in search or [their] stone.” Sal searches for his stone, his Ebenezer, or “stone of help,” and a fixedness in spirituality, which will allow him to grow (1Samuel 7:12). This fixture means embracing the now, thus attaining the IT—the pearl.
At the end of Sal Paradise’s second big road trip with Dean Moriarty he has a mystical vision on Market Street in San Francisco. This moment of ecstasy appears to be a great deal like what William James speaks of when investigating mysticism in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In looking at James’ description of the categories, which define for him a true mystic experience, we find how visionary events can be, and are, a part of some religious-spiritual journeys. Looking into the exact nature of these moments of ecstasy will help in understanding why merely having these experiences cannot be the end-all determinant of a successful spiritual journey.

James says that there are four characteristics of mystical experience: Ineffability, Noetic quality, Transiency, and Passivity (James 380-381 emphasis mine). Accordingly, someone who experiences some form of ecstasy, clarity, or metaphysical happenstance experiences ineffability. Visions are ineffable because that which is “directly experienced…cannot be imparted or transferred to others,” and the visionary cannot “make [this] clear to another who has not had [this] certain feeling” (James 380). Ineffability, thus, underlies Sal’s Market Street vision:

I stopped, frozen with ecstasy on the sidewalk… And *just for a moment* I reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows, and wonderment in the bleakness of the mortal realm, and the *sensation* of death kicking at your heels to move on…and myself hurrying to a plank where all the angles dove off and flew into the holy void of uncreated emptiness… I *felt* sweet, singing *bliss*, *like* a big shot of heroin, in the mainline vein; *like* a gulp of wine in the late afternoon and it *makes you shudder; my feet tingle*. I thought I was going to die the very next
moment. But I didn’t die, and walked four miles and picked up ten long butts. . . I was too young to know what had happened,” (OTR161-162 italics mine).

The totality of the experience cannot be completely conveyed to the reader. The feelings of ecstasy, shuddering, bliss, and tingling, which were felt on Market Street, are Sal’s best attempts to describe this state of ecstasy. Sal continually uses the word “like,” 13 and a plethora of other adjectives, to give us snapshots of the experience, for he cannot fully express what he feels.

At the same time these mystic states have a Noetic quality, in that “they are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain” (James 380). If these visions do provide meaning of great import, is their significance contained within the feeling of the visions themselves or rather in the content, the actions, and choices made after the ecstasy? Looking carefully at the contents of the vision (these being the events and moments described that do not pertain to the feelings of the experience) enables us to see the useful meaning the character could come away with.

The Market Street vision begins, for example, after a horrified look from a shopkeeper: “I walked around picking up butts from the street. I passed a fish-’n-chips joint on Market Street, and (suddenly 14) the woman in there gave me a terrified look as

---

13 Just like Ezekiel vision, As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing continually…In the middle of the living creatures there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro…the fire was bright and the lightning issued from the fire. The living creatures darted to and fro, like a flash of lightning…for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels,” (NRSV Ezekiel 1:13-14, 21 emphasis mine). Both Sal and Ezekiel keep using the word like. They are experiencing something that they cannot wholly put their finger on. They cannot pin down what they are seeing. And just like that, for Sal, he experiences the “ecstasy that [he] always wanted to reach,” and then the transient moment passes (OTR 161).

14 The word suddenly is italicized as an indicator and parallel of transient quality of the vision, which I will describe momentarily.
I passed…I stopped, frozen with ecstasy on the sidewalk” (OTR 161 emphasis mine). Sal, in this moment of despair and terror is “suddenly” flashed a horrified look, which, for some unexplainable reason, causes him to stop “frozen” in a state of ecstasy and the vision begins (OTR161):

I looked down Market Street. I didn't know if it was that or Canal Street in New Orleans: it led to water, ambiguous, universal water…It seemed I had a whole host of memories leading me back to 1750…“No,” that woman (seemed) to say with that terrified glance, “don’t come back and plague your honest hardworking mother. You are no longer like a son to me—and like your father, my first husband…“You are no good, inclined to drunkenness and routs and final disgraceful robbery of the fruits of my ‘umble labors in the hashery. Oh son! did you ever go on your knees and pray for deliverance for all your sins and scoundrel’s acts? Lost boy! Depart! Do not haunt my soul; I’ve done well forgetting you. Reopen no old wounds… (OTR 161)

The woman’s scarred and wounded being is of great importance to this vision. Both the present-day shopkeeper and the visionary reflection of her as a 1750’s peasant mother woman are scarred and injured by the selfishness of her son and husband: “‘No’ that woman (seemed) to say…‘don’t come back and plague your honest hardworking mother” (OTR 161). Here within the vision we find not only one woman scarred by the world, her son, and her husband, but a line of women stretching back over the decades. She begs her son to change and to hurt others no longer: “Oh son! did you ever go on your knees and pray for deliverance for all your sins and scoundrel’s acts? Lost boy! Depart! Do
not haunt my soul; I’ve done well forgetting you. Reopen no old wounds…” (OTR 162)

She has been wounded and wants these injuries to stay scars and not be re-opened.

Sal, once the vision ends, has a decision to make. How does he respond? The Noetic quality of the experience has placed a choice at his feet. He can strive and attain this state of ecstasy again—a mere tingly feeling—or acknowledge the reality of the woman’s pain—or at least women like her.

Does he acknowledge his part of being a son or husband and hurting a woman he loves? The Sal of the moment does not acknowledge her pain. No, for, throughout the book he and his friends have continued to impose on his Aunt. They have moved her from coast to coast, ruined her peace of mind with wild parties, and begged her for money and help. He too is this metaphoric son of the vision and yet, he does nothing. Paradise has a chance to look at this woman’s scars, see a parallel to his aunt, and act with compassion. Does he embrace the moment, the good-IT, look at the woman, and take seriously her sorrow? No, for the vision ends and he is left picking up cigarette butts wandering the streets of San Francisco.

How can this be a successful moment in a life-faith if he is left with nothing? In reference to how to judge the power and application of a religious experience, William James says, “By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots” (20). The Sal of the moment does not take seriously her pain. Yet, the authorial Sal, of down the road, writing and reflecting on this experience says, “I was too young to know what happened” (OTR 161). Sal was indeed too young, at that present moment, to know what to do with the mystical happenstance because it happened so suddenly. As James says, visions are transient, for “they cannot be sustained for long” (James 381). They come suddenly and
leave as suddenly as they came. This sudden experience and Sal’s childlike mindset leave him with no fruits.

Mysticism—ecstasy—by itself, then, is a failed form of life-faith, if sought as the primary essence of that faith. The vision’s transience and passivity leaves Sal lost for words, lost for what to do.

_Just for a moment_ [he] reached the point of ecstasy that [he] always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows, and wonderment in the bleakness of the mortal realm, and the _sensation_ of death kicking at your heels to move on…” (OTR 162).

Unfortunately, for him, this moment passes. He was able to “beat time,” beat the calendar; beat the cosmos, but then what? He is left without an active beat in this world. He is left inadequately prepared, at the time, to respond to the true pain of the scarred women of the 1950’s, much less the 1750’s. He is left without activity, lost on the streets of San Francisco; this vision by itself doesn’t do much for him, other than leave him down and out—fruitless.

It seems as though the vision leaves him with nothing, but this is not the case. Sal is not completely lost. In reflecting on this experience down the road, the authorial Sal is able to think about both the vision and the circumstances after the vision, writing,

_In the window I smelled all the food of San Francisco…where the menus themselves were soft with foody esculence as though dipped in hot broths and roasted dry and good enough to eat too. Just show me the bluefish spangle on a menu and I’d eat it’” (OTR 162)._
Why does the authorial Sal write the smells of San Francisco? He is pointing the missed opportunity to act within that wonderfully smelling world of the present. He had a chance to acknowledge the despair within his vision and tell the world about it in that moment, but he does not.

In the writing of his experience, however, down the road looking back, Sal participates in the IT of now and the pearl of the moment. He writes, “That’s my ah-dream of San Francisco. Add fog, hungermaking raw fog, and the throb of neons in the soft night, the clack of high heeled beauties, white doves in a Chinese grocery window…” (OTR 163). The ellipse is of great importance, for it means a continuation of the “ah-dream” of possibility of active compassion. For the younger Sal the vision ends, his chance slips by, he does not act, and he’s back on the road of the bad-IT in the next chapter. Yet for the authorial Sal, the ellipse represents both great despair and immense hope. In these three dots the authorial Sal despairs in his younger self’s inability to see and compassionately react to the pain of old wounds. On the other hand, authorial Sal expresses hope in the act of writing. His eyes have been opened by the time he composes the story and this enables him to write about his own scars and the scars of others.\(^\text{15}\)

It is in writing about their own wounds and the scars of others that we see a true step-instance of compassion. Kerouac uses all three of his narrators as story tellers—men looking back on their lives, seeing their wrongs, looking at their mistakes, and acting compassionately in the best way they can in the moment. In this, we see the momentary and long-term results of the visionary experience that occurs in *On the Road, Dharma*

\(^{15}\)There is a similar ellipse in *Dharma Bums* on page five. Ray Smith says, “I was very devout in those days and was practicing my religious devotions almost to perfection. Since then I’ve become a little hypocritical about my lip-service and a little tired and cynical. Because now I am grown so old and neutral…” (5 bold ellipse mine). The final ellipse points to the internal change in the narrator down the road reflecting on past experience.
In all circumstances, the storytellers of the present reveal to the reader their mystical experiences, what they encountered then, what they learned to some degree at that moment, and then the now of reflection.\footnote{It is important to understand that mysticism and active engagement in the world does not always occur. In Daniel Zelinski’s essay “Morality and Mysticism: the views of Dogen and Eckhart,” he states: There is a common conception of mystics as reclusive hermits who remove themselves from the social world in pursuit of some religious quest. This picture involves the mystic’s isolation not only from other people, but from all worldly concerns including all conventional notions of ethics. (2) Therefore, my claim that mysticism and active-compassionate living walk hand in hand in Kerouac’s work could be construed as odd. Yet, as the authorial voice of the narrators proclaim in various ways, they should have acted.}

Jack Duluoz, of \textit{Desolation Angels}, tells the tale of his metaphysical and psychological experience during his stay as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in Washington State. Duluoz, perhaps out of all of Kerouac’s characters, comes the closest to a visionary quest of active compassion while on a physical and metaphoric mountain. Originally, he, like Sal Paradise, seeks an ecstatic experience and revelation like the one we see on Market Street. In the second chapter Duluoz confesses what he was hoping to experience after his time spent on the peak: “When I get to the top of Desolation Peak and everybody leaves…and I’m alone I will come face to face with God or Tathagata and find out once and for all what is the meaning of all this existence and suffering and going to and fro in vain” (DA, 4).

He hopes for an experience with the Divine, but what he receives resembles a mental breakdown. He does not, like Paradise, use the word “like” to express what he feels, but rather symbols, gibberish, and scribbling:
Come, now, look…

This experience leaves him desiring to “AWAKEN AWAKEN AWAKEN NOW,” but can he (DA 58)?

The Dulouz of the moment cannot, for he is having a mental breakdown, but the authorial Dulouz can. He writes what he experienced and learned while off the mountain and down the road from this experience. It looks like gibberish, but he writes, “Up in the valley and down by the mountain—the bird Wake Up!…AWAKEN…NOW…this is the
wisdom of the millennial rat” (DA 58). On the peak he sees and experiences a rhythm word flow, the cry of the bird, the wisdom of the “millennial rat,” and the call of the world, to awaken and embrace the now (DA 58). Is he able to do it in the moment? No, but the authorial Jack is able to do so later in reflection. He writes this and quotes the Buddha:

Your trip was long…you came to this raindrop called your life and it is yours—we have proposed that you vow to be awakened… dive into this rectangular white blaze of this thought now…You have been assigned to wake up, this is the golden eternity…awakener…be you loving, lad, lord, of infinite variety—be you one of us, Great Knowers Without Knowing, Great Lovers Beyond Love…look—.”(DA 22).

In quoting the Buddha, the authorial Jack sees and realizes that he must awake in the now, not in the passive later, but within the present that is the “golden eternity.” Jack tries to awake.

Duluoz, however, both writer and mountain climber, knows that even within solitude one cannot escape the realities of time and space. He has been called to awake, but one cannot completely awake in desolation. To be desolate—without mind or thought—within isolation is impossible for him. There will always be a now to deal with. In acknowledging this he writes:

I learned that I hate myself because by myself I am only myself and not even that and how monotonous it is to be monotonous…I learned learn Learned no learning nothing…I go mad one afternoon thinking like this, only one week to go…I want to come down RIGHT AWAY because the smell of onions on my hands as I
bring blueberries to my lips on the mountainside suddenly reminds me of the
smell of hamburgers…I got a place to go and poems to write about hearts not just
rocks—Desolation Adventure finds me finding at the bottom of myself abysmal
nothingness worse than that no illusion even—my mind’s in rags (DA 68)
He wants desperately to go down and live and act within the world. He is sick of
desolation, sick of his mountaintop mystic endeavors, sick of thinking. He has been
called to act, and like Sal, he experiences the food smells and realities of the world; the
essence of the moment; a call to action.

The Duluoz of this present, after sixty-three days in solitude is left with a mind in
rags and “a column of feces about the height and size of a baby” (DA 71). That’s all that
remains, “rather than the fruition of detached enlightenment” he is left with feces\textsuperscript{17} and
rags—the cigarette butts of Sal (Giamo 158).

In the end, Kerouac’s characters cannot force the visions. This is the essence of a
visions’ metaphysical “passivity” (James 222). A mystic cannot recreate the vision. The
mystic cannot actively force it—or even IT, for that matter—but must remain passive.
The vision just occurs, without the visionary doing a single thing. Therefore, with a lack
of activity we are left with a passive character waiting for something to take him out of
time and space. We do not have someone actively and fruitfully taking what they learn in
their vision and applying it to the world. In focusing on visions alone they do not open
their eyes to pain nor choose compassion. Thus, they fail in these moments.
Mysticism—ecstasy—by itself, then, is a failed form of life faith, if sought as the primary
essence of that faith.

\textsuperscript{17} Duluoz being left with nothing but feces brings a whole new meaning to “Passing through,” which is the
name of the final chapters in Desolation Angels.
The authorial Duluoz, not his younger self, recognizes that passive transcendence can never bring a life-faith to completion. He, as a result of his experiences, is able to reflect and show his mental scars, write about his experience, and thus awake in the IT of now. He writes,

We’re all famous writers more or less, but they wonder why I’m so sunk now, so unexcited as we sit among our published books and poems…it’s a peaceful sorrow. A peaceful sorrow at home is the best I’ll ever offer the world, in the end, and so I told my Desolation Angels goodbye. A new life for me. (DA 409)

Awakening in the now, does not mean that a person is necessarily eternally blissful. It does mean that they are actively and compassionately striving to live. As a writer living a “peaceful sorrow at home,” Duluoz can reflect on his experiences and the world, and in turn, like the Buddha, write a text that will help his readers awake within the now—on the road of the moment (DA 409).

The road of the moment and the visions experienced within this realm thus provide a way for characters to live life successfully within time, if, of course, they choose to do so. This is the success we see in the authorial voice of these narrators. The road provides a place of activity and a place for the creation-discovery of homemade religious success, if one chooses.

Yet they must learn to make these choices and not rely too heavily on fading ecstatic feeling. Living with an active spiritual life-beat entails embracing the means within the confines of time. They can choose to act out of selfishness or out of love, thus

---

18 This includes the mountain, for the road, in this sense, is a metaphor for the journey these characters are on. They aren’t at a physical home, but are on the road. They are out and about.
opening the oyster, discovering a pearl of compassion, and embracing time-constrained activity.

**Burning the Scripts of the Mountaintop Mystic**

To live successfully in the confines of time requires an honest attempt to act compassionately. They must beat-act. They must caringly beat time like a musician, in that, to beat time successfully does not mean questing for mystical escape but living and responding compassionately in the here and now. True successful moments occur when characters find a rhythm to live life through active choice, thus, in the case of our narrators, becoming true beat writers.\(^{19}\)

These, successes occur by embracing the now—not subscribing totally to metaphysical passivity. However, embracing the now also means committing one’s self to an active ideology which is always evolving. For Kerouac, active ideology is crucial for the development of compassion. This activity is a movement of the mind, not just the body, for thought itself controls actions.

Active ideology, then, can only be incorporated and fully adopted into life-faith by stopping the misguided movement of the body. The mental and physical energy used in blind adherence to bodily activity and movement must be directed inward to analyze what causes bodily flight or movement, to analyze the catalytic reasons for movement, to discover the ingrained and socialized mental scripts of the 1950’s, and ultimately, to actively burn these scripts in order to change. In burning these socialized scripts—these

---

\(^{19}\) We have already seen that the writing and revealing of the authors’ life scars is one of the ways they can act compassionately. This is one of the ultimate acts of compassion that I am claiming, but there is a process which these men must go through in order to become the compassionate Beat Writers. By Beat writer I mean a writer laying down an example of an active compassionate Beat in the world.
psychologically destructive patterns—Kerouac’s protagonists are able to open the door for compassionate and successful living.

In *Dharma Bums*, Kerouac emphasizes activity and *motion of beliefs* through his character Japhy Ryder. Japhy questions narrator Ray Smith’s Buddhist strivings for the “Chinese [practice of] do-nothing,” and asks:

“Why do you sit on your ass all day?”

[Ray says,] “I practice do-nothing.”

“What’s the difference? *Burn it. My Buddhism is activity.*” (DB 175, emphasis mine).

Ray “sit[s] on his ass” and Japhy incorporates his belief into the activity of his day (DB 175).

Notice, however, Japhy incorporates belief into his activity, not activity into his belief, therefore keeping him free from stagnant and unchanging Buddhist thought. Buddhist thought is not erred in and of itself. However, one’s approach to this line of thought is bad if it is dogmatic and unsympathetic to change.

Japhy calls Ray to “burn” that idea out of his mind by actively ridding himself of this passivity. Those, like Ray, who do not have ideological or physical activity, are stuck on the metaphorical mountain of stagnation. They are stuck in what I will call the mind-frame of the mountaintop mystic—their passive subscription to ideological models of manhood.

Subscribing to these scripts results in unchallenged acceptance and inactivity. Thus, they must actively challenge ideas and open their eyes to their own inadequacies. To counter mountaintop mystic stagnation and attain a life-faith of active compassion,
rather than “Do Nothing” metaphysical passivity, Kerouac’s characters must attempt to actively burn passivity.

The act of following must cease in order for Kerouac’s characters to create a successfully homemade-active-life-faith on their own paths. His characters must come to a realization that the act of following is misguided, and thus, must make a choice to move away on their own. In other words, the progressive process towards an active life-faith involves a discipleship of independence.

Homemade spirituality matures, then, by discarding the physical and mental acts of following. It matures by burning these passive scripts. Sal Paradise initially is a follower enamored with his restless buddy Dean:

They danced down the street like dingedodies, and I *shambled* after as I’ve been doing all of my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a common place thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!”” (OTR 5, emphasis mine)

Here we find a born disciple: a follower of people who are active and who “danced down streets like dingedodies.” He is a man who later confesses he “just wanted to follow” (OTR, 123). He follows those who seem to never exhaust, “never yawn or say a common

---

20 This notion of burning may have a connection to the “Fire Sermon” delivered by the Buddha and written in “Three Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha” (Thera) In this sermon the Buddha says:

Bhikkhus, all is burning …The mind is burning, ideas are burning, mind-consciousness is burning, mind-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with mind-contact for its indispensable condition, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion. I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs. (Thera).
place thing, but burn, burn, burn” (OTR 5). This dancing, this burning is what Sal is attracted to. He wants this activity for himself and thus he chases—shambles—after them.

Sadly, his following is not independent of others. He does not just follow, but “shambled after as I’ve been doing all my life,” (OTR 5). He is not actively running in full stride, but shambling—awkwardly shuffle-tailing behind the others. Sal is stuck, gripped, by the pull of others; he shambles along, thus failing to create his own path.

Sal is not the only character of Kerouac’s who shambles, relies, idolizes, and follows others. Protagonist Ray Smith of Dharma Bums follows his buddy Japhy Ryder on a climb up the Matterhorn Mountain. Ray has never climbed before, and does not let this fact worry him until he observes Japhy’s actions:

With my sneakers it was easy as pie to just dance nimbly from boulder to boulder, but after a while I noticed how gracefully Japhy was doing it and he just ambled from boulder to boulder, sometimes in a deliberate dance with his legs crossing from right to left, right to left and for awhile I followed his every step… (DB 64, italics mine)

At first Ray has faith in his ability to leap from boulder to boulder on his own, but then he notices what Japhy is doing. Instead of trusting in his own ability, he decides to follow the exact steps of the man who goes before him. He deserts his own path, his own road, and follows, only to say that he soon “learned it was better for me to just spontaneously pick my own boulders and make a ragged dance of my own” (DB 64).

Within two lines, he breaks from this dependency and points out how following can sometimes present problems for individuals. Ray originally was climbing “easy as
pie,” but then fell into a following pattern. In looking to Japhy, a man with previous skill and climbing ability, he loses trust in his own active abilities. He follows, only to go back to his own way—“finding my own true step, which was short steps slowly patiently going up the mountain at one mile an hour, so I was always thirty yards behind him,” (DB 62). This is his own path, one that is better for him, and yet he is still behind.

Does this independence, which places Ray on a physical path behind Japhy, represent a failure to break pre-existing patterns—a failure to create his own path? No, here we have an example of a man who physically and actively finds his own way. However, with Ray, Sal, and others we find followers who tag behind both physically and mentally. His “thirty yards behind” statement represents more than a physical following; it represents a mental following as well:

But I can’t recreate the exact (will try) brilliance of all Japhy’s answers and come-backs and come-ons with which he made me on pins and needles all the time and did eventually stick something in my crystal head that made me change my plans in life. (DB 13)

Kerouac’s characters who succeed in making their own homemade spirituality must not only break from physical following but the mental following of people whose ideas “made [him] on pins and needles” (DB 13).

If someone is on a spiritual quest it makes sense for them to look to others for guidance; however, problems are created if characters get stuck following those who are also followers—those blind to their own passivity. Sal’s captivation and shuffle-stutter-step-following of his buddy Dean blinds him to the problems of following such a man. Yet, late in the book he reveals the dark side of Dean through Galatea Dunkle. She says,
“You’ve done so many awful things, I don’t know what to say to you.”

And in fact that was the point, and they all sat around looking at Dean with lowered and hating eyes…he just giggled…I suddenly realized that Dean by virtue of his enormous series of sins, was becoming the Idiot, The Imbecile, the Saint of the lot.

“You have absolutely no regard for anybody but yourself and your damned kicks. All you think about is what’s hanging between your legs and how much money or fun you can get out of people and then you just throw them aside…It never occurs to you that life is serious and there are people trying to make something decent out of it instead of just goofing all the time.”

That’s what Dean was, the HOLY GOOF. (OTR 183)

Dean is a goof not active in the way others are, in that others are “trying to make something decent out of [life]…” (OTR 183). Dean’s activity fails because in his goofing he is hurting others. The giggling Dean does not see how his selfishness hurts people along life’s way. Nonetheless, his blind-eyed disciple Sal praises him for it.

Sal fails to see Dean’s moments of failure. Dean gets stuck in a rut and does not participate in pure activity, pure being, IT, but participates in restlessness. Neither he nor Sal see the true plight of the women Dean has hurt in life. Sal in this moment does not see that Dean does not always “burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles” (OTR 5). Dean is mentally trapped in his blind ways.

Dean’s mental entrapment goes deeper. In reflection on their friend Bull Lee, from Kansas, Sal writes:
[Bull] spent all his time talking and teaching others. Jane sat at his feet; so did I; so did Dean; and so had Carlo Marx. We’d all learned from him. He as a grey none descript-looking fellow you wouldn’t notice on the street, unless you looked closer and saw his mad, boney skull and its strange youthfulness—a Kansas Minister with exotic, phenomenal fires and mysteries. (OTR 135 emphasis mine) Dean shambles after Bull like Sal shambles after Dean. Therefore, Sal is even more susceptible to follow Bull because Dean follows this man as well. In other words, Sal follows—listens to—bows at the feet of—those whom Dean worships. Notice, though, that Bull is sitting, teaching, with disciples at his feet. He is physically still—motionless—yet, active in thought. He seems to have no need to follow.

If you look closely, however, you’d see “his mad, boney skull and its strange youthfulness,” for he, in fact, is one of the “mad ones” (OTR 134). Not only that, but in his teaching position of authority he is a “minister with exotic, phenomenal, fires, and mysteries,” (OTR 134 italics mine). He does not just burn in activity of thought but doles out the fire, which incite the burn. Bull, therefore, in this moment, is on a road of success. He is actively able to teach. Like George Shearing, Bull has embraced the moment.

Unfortunately, Bull hinders Sal in the process of beating out an active ideological Beat, for Sal is a follower. Paradise does not listen to Bull solely because of his active thought, but due to the admiration Dean allots Lee. In following Dean, and thus listening to Bull, Sal does not make choices on his own. Thus, Sal, Ray, and others are not only

---

21 Here we find an image similar to a scene in On the Road where jazz player George Shearing sits in one place rocking in his chair and moving to the flow of music. Shearing is referred to as a god. “There’s god’s empty chair” Dean says after the set is finished (188).

Lee too is god-like in this sense for he is mentally rolling and rocking out ideas in a great “rich shower” much like Shearing did with his music (OTR 188).

This scene also has a striking resemblance to Mary and others at the feet of Christ, while Martha darts too and fro getting dinner ready, or disciples at the feet of the Buddha.
followers of people in the physical realm, but also followers of people with pre-formed ideas. These men are stuck in ideological, societal, and theological scripts, which hinder activity and blind them to their misguided shamblings.

For Kerouac’s characters to succeed, they must initiate an active cleansing, discarding passive adherence to these societal and ideological scripts. The scripts of racism and misogyny\textsuperscript{22} restrict their lives. These scripts inhibit and freeze the characters in passive acceptance. For a homemade faith to truly begin, they must break the molds of physical and mental discipleship.

Kerouac’s characters accomplish this in part. They have moments of transcendence when they see themselves and others clearly. They have moments when they see the way and make choices to stop following. However, these moments of compassionate vision are never complete. For example, Sal, in the third part of the book makes an active decision and opens his eyes to the shortcomings of his life as a white man; he opens his eyes to the scripts that blind him from the reality of his passivity. He laments,

I felt like a speck on the surface of the sad red earth…wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best of the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joys, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night…I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a “white-man” disillusioned…I was only myself Sal Paradise…wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America. (OTR 169).

\textsuperscript{22} Homophobia is another ideological script these men must fight against, which I will not be specifically addressing in this paper. However, for more information concerning homosexuality in the lives of “The Beats” see Catherine R Simpson’s essay “The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation.”
He sees the flaws of his whiteness and longs to be a part of something new. He sees himself as a “‘white-man’ disillusioned” and takes an active step away from following the scripts of the white world (OTR 169). Sal attempts to burn away a part of his 1950’s whiteness, part of the script that he holds—that holds him—tight.

Unfortunately, Sal does not light the entire manuscript of stagnate thought on fire. In one of his first steps towards a compassionate life-beat the vision remains incomplete, for he groups all minorities together. In order not to be the man he is, he wishes he were anything but white. Robert Bly, in his book *Iron John*, talks about the image and socialization of men. In reference to the 1950’s man he writes,

> The Fifties man was supposed to like football,[^23] be aggressive, stick up for the United States, never cry, and always provide. But receptive space or intimate space was missing in this image of man. The personality lacked some sense of flow. The psyche lacked compassion…The Fifties man had a clear vision of what man was, and what male responsibilities were, but the isolation and one-sided-ness of his vision were dangerous. (Bly 2)

Kerouac’s characters fight against this “clear vision.” This vision of the Fifties man leaves Sal in a state of disillusionment, hence his desire to be one with the any minority group. The “feeling that the best of the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy…not enough life, joys, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night…” arise out of a desire to burn what Bly refers to as a “clear vision” (OTR 169 and Bly 2). Sadly, even with all of Sal’s good intentions he cannot burn his wayward and ignorant notions of the minority other.

[^23]: Kerouac himself went to Colombia on a football scholarship from his home town, but eventually dropped out because of his own sense of disillusionment.
How, then, can I claim that Kerouac’s characters are moving toward a successful life faith if they cannot escape from—perhaps transcend—all of these restrictive ideologies? Robert Holton, in his essay “Kerouac Among the Fellahin: On The Road to the Postmodern,” investigates a similar question;

In Kerouac’s Beat classic On the Road there is on one hand, the expression of a radical desire to challenge the existing social order through a foregrounding of the conventions and limitations of racial identity; and, on the other hand, there is a misrecognition of those conventions and limitations so profound as to justify the claim that ultimately On the Road legitimates as much as it challenges the master narratives that postmodernism seeks to undo.

Kerouac does have his characters challenge the existing norms of America and whitemaleness. Unfortunately, and as Holton points out in the second prong of his thesis, Sal challenges the scripts of the white, male, American, but not the negative scripts he attributes to the marginalized fellahin minority. Sal attempts to burn the script of his “disillusioned” self by “challeng[ing] the existing social order…of [his own] racial identity” not the plight of the other (Holton 4). In fact, referring to all marginalized peoples as fellahin is, in and of itself, ignorant because it does not allow them their own individual identities. Sal’s white male scripts blind him to the racial discrimination and the socialized slavery of these minority groups of the 1950’s.

---

24 “Kerouac took the term fellahin from Spengler’s The Decline of the West (Gifford and Lee 38). Originally signifying Arabic peasantry, the term is extended by Spengler to include one of the three types in his historical “morphology of peoples” (169)…The fellahin is the third term and refers in part to the descendents of the primitives, those groups marginalized by civilization during its ascendancy who remain when a culture, having risen to world dominance, ends its trajectory with a gradual collapse” (Holton 4).

25 “In her discussion on gender, postmodernism, and the “pervasive misogyny of the beats, Ellen Friedman has recently argued that Kerouac and the Beats, alienated from modern culture, looked backward to earlier versions of the master narratives rather than forward and beyond them…They are the context of the beats’ rebellion. The beats, in their opposition, legitimate master narratives” (250).” (Holton 9).
A slow progressive change occurs, however, when characters refuse to follow normative scripts, attempt to burn their shambling, and step out on their own. This causes change in ideas, in the people the characters follow, and the conceptions of life.

Unfortunately, though they may burn one script, another may be waiting to take its place. The fear of women, for example, is a deeply stagnant ideology that causes the men to flee on the road. In this flight they have bodily movement yet, passively resign to preformed ideas. In the minds of these male characters women metaphorically represent stasis to its extreme. To these men, women represent death. If these characters are questing and learning about activity as a source of success, then mobility away from women may be perceived as desired. However, as we have seen, flight for flight’s sake is a failure. These men run and move out of fear. This fear represents a passivity of the mind, which falls lackadaisically in line with the beliefs of the time and results in egocentric, misogynistic, uncompassionate, and passive living.

Nina Baym, in her essay says, “If one accepts current theories of American Literature, one accepts as a consequence…a literature that is essentially male,” (432). This literature, being male, leads to a “myth” of reality which revolves around that of male self-identity and formulation (Baym 437).

The myth narrates a confrontation of the American individual—[the male]—with the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America. This promise is the deeply romantic one that in this new land, untrammeled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition…The myth also holds that as something artificial and secondary to human nature, society exerts an unmitigatedly
destructive pressure on individuality…and there is only one way to relate it to the individual—as an adversary (Baym 437 italics mine).

Sal, Jack, Ray, Japhy, and even Dean are on this metaphoric, yet all too real, myth guided path away from the destructive pressure of society, in search of the “promise offered by the idea of America” (Baym 437). For Sal and Dean, the ever distant coast, activity on the road, and the illustrious search for bad-IT, incorporates this “promise.” Where as, for Japhy, Ray and Jack their quest up into the mountains and to the far coasts of the west, Mexico, or Japan, searching for a deeper understanding of themselves, points to their idea of the promise.

Yet, they are confronted at every turn by women and society. They have no clue how to deal with them. They are operating within this American myth that women and society are “adversaries,” “entrappers and domesticators” (Baym 437, 438). “For heterosexual man, these socializing women are…the locus of powerful attraction. First because everybody has social and conventional instincts; second, because his deepest emotional attachments are to women” (Baym 438).

The idea of woman and all that is involved (sex, care, and relationship) actively draws men towards these females, and at the same time, causes these males to actively flee. This active retreat represents passive adherence to the mental failings of misogyny. These characters treat women as objects that either complete them or halt their progressive search for IT. Women are treated therefore as an object to be cast on or off at anytime. It is true that movement occurs, but as we have seen, activity does not equal success. Thus, these men actively participate in a passive mentality of the negative pre-formed script of misogyny.
These characters either can’t get enough of women or can’t get far enough away from them. Dean throughout OTR, as seen above, marries three women and divorces two of them. He continually jumps from one to the next, “balling” one woman and then the other, never stopping, always the screaming yea-sayer on the move. Yet he always seems to move out of fear of stagnation with one woman (OTR 38).

Sal, on the other hand, runs due to pain. In the beginning of Road Sal “first met Dean not long after [his] wife and [he] split up,” thus advancing a depressed nature, which he refers to as a “serious illness…that…had something to do with the miserably weary split up…” (OTR 1). His break up with his wife causes despair and a sickness, which is the antithesis of bliss he seeks. He is stuck, sad, melancholy, and desires mobility away from women and to the “organized chaos” and “perpetual motion” of Dean (Giamo 22-23). This supposed entrapment and stasis, combined with a desire for motion, drives this confrontation of the self while at the same time an attempt to be “divorced from specific social circumstances” (Baym 438).

Ray Smith confronts and avoids women on this deeper level. He acts like the rest of Kerouac’s characters. He climbs mountains, and reads the Diamond Sutra, he meditates, and goes to parties, but he confesses

I’d gone through an entire year of celibacy based on my feeling that lust was the direct cause of birth which was the direct cause of suffering and death and I had really no lie come to a point where I regarded lust as offensive and even cruel…Pretty girls make graves.” (DB 29)
He is not comfortable with Buddhist yabyums\(^{26}\) or women at all for that matter; thus, he incorporates a vow of celibacy into his Buddhist belief. Women cause death, and by being celibate, in a sense, he runs from both death and commitment—both of which are permanent and passive states.\(^{27}\)

These characters are running without purpose or at least a purpose without compassion. According to Baym for a successful flight in this myth to occur (a failed flight in the eyes of this writer), “one must select a protagonist with a certain believable mobility” (438). Kerouac does this, for this mobility is the activity of Dean, Japhy, Ray and Sal. They can successfully flee and escape into the wilderness at anytime but they fail in the great purpose of activity because of their fear of stasis and the yearning for a false freedom. Wilderness itself does not bring the satisfaction they desire for

The entrammeling society and the promising landscape…are depicted in unmistakable feminine terms, and this gives sexual character to the protagonist story…This sexual definition has melodramatic, misogynistic implications [and thus the landscape]…has attributes simultaneously of a virginal bride and a nonthreatening mother; its female qualities are articulated with respect to a male angle of vision: what can nature do for me, asks the hero, what can it give? (Baym 438, 440)

This escape into the wilderness—this activity—is still infused with an attraction and revulsion toward women.

\(^{26}\) Yabyums are this: “Japhy…sat crosslegged on the floor and motioned to Princess, who came over and sat down on him facing him her arms about his neck and they sat like that saying nothing for a while…this is what they do in the temples of Tibet. It’s a holy ceremony, it’s done in front of chanting priests. People pray and recite Om Mani Pahdme Hum, which means Amen the Thunderbolt in the Dark Void” (DB 28-29)

\(^{27}\) Death, mortality, and the realization that all must come to an end is one of the obstacles Kerouac’s characters must come to grips with.
In *Desolation Angels* Jack Duluoz has an even more dramatic aversion to women. Giamo, in his end notes says, “Kerouac puts this [the fear of stagnation] more harshly…when he writes that ‘for every little sweet lump of baby born that women croon over, is one vast rotten meat burning slow worms in the graves of this earth’” (Giamo 223). Oddly, just a few pages prior Jack confesses he is in love with a woman named Ruth Heaper. He asks himself, “And where’s my “peace”? Ah, there it is in that belly of pajama wheat,” referring to Ruth (DA 295).

Ruth Heaper is the fictional character based a woman named Joyce Johnson. Johnson wrote a book named *Minor Characters* subtitled “A Young Woman’s Coming-Of-Age in the Beat Orbit of Jack Kerouac.” She chronicles her life in New York’s Greenwich Village with Kerouac, and she seems happy saying,

> I’m good for him, Jack tells me. I don’t mind anything he does. I don’t mind about the sleeping bag, do I?…At night when the cold air came in with a rush into the little room where Jack was sleeping, and seeped under the edges of the closed door, I could imagine myself in a place without walls, an immense campground where, lying wrapped in blankets, I could feel in my own warmth absolute proof of my existence. (Johnson 133, emphasis mine)

Her time spent with Kerouac incites a “warm…absolute proof of my existence,” and yet at the beginning of this reflection she asks herself if she minds Jack’s presence (Johnson 133). Though she envisions herself out in the spaces Kerouac loves to go, out into the “immense [wilderness] campgrounds,” she cannot go to these places, for the male in the myth Baym speaks of owns them. Joyce understands this, for immediately after this warm, yet, wary reflection, she directly quotes *Desolation Angels*. Jack Duluoz says
I’m a regular fool in pale house enslaved to lust for women who hate me, they lay their bartering flesh all over the divans, it’s one fleshpot—insanity all of it, I should forswear and chew em all out and go hit the clean rail—I wake up glad to find myself saved in the wilderness mountains—For that lumpy roll flesh with juicy hole I’d sit through eternities of horror in the gray rooms illuminated by gray sun, with cops and alimoners at the door and the jail beyond? —It’s a bleeding comedy—The Great Wise Sages of pathetic understanding elude me when it comes to harems—Harem-scarem, it’s all in heaven now—bless their all their bleating-hearts—Some lambs are female, some angels have woman wings, it’s all mothers in the end and forgive me for my sardony—excuse me for my rut.

(Hor hor hor) (Johnson 133)

Here we find a man, happy to awake “saved in the wilderness mountains” away from the lust that enslaves him and the “Harem-scarem…Hor hor hor” of the world (Johnson 133). Johnson confesses that this passage, “this awful metaphysical linking of sex, birth, the grave,” was not meant for “Ruth Heaper’s,” ears, for this “minor character” (Johnson 133). A mere four pages after Jack Duluoz revels in Ruth Heaper’s, “belly of pajama wheat,” he quotes the Buddha, saying, “Tho she is beautiful, and gifted, ‘t were better for all of you to fall into a Tiger’s mouth than to fall into her plans” (DA 295, 299). Thus it seems that the wilderness itself will also be corrupted, lose its virginal quality, and be treated by the characters like a “Hor hor hor” (Johnson 133).

The males’ draw, pull, and attraction to these women cause these characters to move. Their desire
Gives urgency and depth to the protagonists’ rejection of society. To do it [— reject society—] he must project onto the woman those attractions that he feels, and cast her into the melodramatic role of temptress, antagonist, obstacle—a character whose mission in life seems to be to ensnare him and deflect him from life’s important purpose of self-discovery and self assertion. (Baym 438)

Duluoz loves his supposed freedom and mobility to escape into the mountains and run from society. Unfortunately, this love falls in line with the male myth that has “been transmuted into an avowedly hopeless quest for unencumbered space (On the Road), or the evocation of flight for its own sake…” (Baym 437).

Therefore, women to these men represent stagnation and death. These men fear death and therefore, run and yearn for activity. Due to this fear, many of Kerouac’s characters, as seen above, either jump from woman to woman, or abstain from them completely—becoming celibate, throwing them off the sides of boats like Japhy Ryder does before going to Japan, or divorcing them like Dean has done numerous times. Fear of stasis, immobility, and a desire for freedom drives these men out into the world.

In desiring to change, in actively choosing a new road, Kerouac’s characters must move more than their body, attempt to burn forms of stagnate ideology, and react compassionately after metaphysical experience. The road provides this connection to the world that will save them from being stuck on the stagnant mountaintop. Active choices result in compassion for humanity and do not leave the spiritual quester passively waiting for visions, running from fears, or being driven by stagnant ideology. These passive choices and ideologies must be burned along with the scripts of these character’s 1950’s manhood, racism, and misogyny.
Understand and Forgive?

With all these instances of selfish action, can we as readers, can I as a writer, actually claim that these misogynistic, racist, and homophobic males actually have true moments of success? Do these characters do more then change paths on a mountain climb or do more than acknowledge the white man’s world hasn’t given them enough? Joyce Johnson in *Minor Characters* says, “I hate Jack’s woman-hatred, hate it, mourn it, understand, and finally forgive” (Johnson 133). This woman, this supposed entrapper and domesticator, forgives Kerouac for all his womanizing, hate, and fear of females. Can we as a reader do the same?

We can. We can if we see why these men are portrayed as they appear in these books. Though I claim a successful faith is born of pain, depression, fear of stasis, and misogyny, it manifests itself in compassion. The narrators of each of these books are telling the tale of their lives. They are looking back at life and showing us the scars of the women they have hurt, the humanity they have seen, and injuries of themselves. They are actively writing, telling, and showing the failure-scars as an act of compassionate success.

Ray Smith, as seen in the very beginning of this paper, shows the reader Rosie’s scars. Confessing, “‘Yes.’ I had seen her arms, which were all cut up…but I was planning on having fun tonight,” to which Cody replies, “*Fun isn’t everything. You’ve got some responsibilities some times you know*” (DB 109, emphasis mine). The Ray of that moment fails because he just wanted to have fun. Yet the authorial Ray, writing down the road, lives up to his responsibility and shows the reader Rosie’s scars, shows

---

28 Jim Christy, who compared Kerouac to St. Augustine, was right in this aspect.
the reader his own inept shamblings, and shows the errors of his ways as a warning and as a guide for how to live successfully. Ray does not want us to be ignorant of such circumstances as he formally was. He wants us to look at these scars and respond compassionately in our own way.

Authorial Sal also shows us the scars of injured humanity when living with a Mexican woman named Terry. In a moment of compassionate living he writes,

Terry came out with tears of sorrieness in her eyes...In reverent and sweet little silence she took all her clothes off and slipped her tiny body into the sheets with me. It was brown as grapes. *I saw her poor belly where there was a Caesarian scar*; her hips were so narrow she couldn’t bear a child without getting gashed open...I made love to her in the sweetness of the weary morning. Then two tired angels of some kind, hung-up forlornly in an LA shelf, having found the closest and most delicious thing in life together, we fell asleep and slept till late afternoon.

*(OTR 77-78 italics mine)*

Sal lets the reader see Terry’s scars, and in turn see the emotional scars of both of them—“two tired angels of some kind hung up forlornly.” Upon reflection of this experience Sal says, “It was Terry who brought my soul back...The days rolled by. I forgot about the east and all about Dean and Carlo and the bloody road” *(OTR 89-90)*. In this moment the younger Sal actively embraces this woman. He does not run to the wilderness, he does not objectify her, he, no, *they*, embrace the moment together. Unfortunately, this is but for a moment. Within no time the socialized scripts return and Sal dresses Terry up in Hollywood fantasies. In the next chapter authorial Sal confesses that his younger self believed played off this relationship as a part of the Hollywood life. He writes his
younger and naïve thoughts: “This was my time in Hollywood, my Hollywood career” (OTR). In confessing this on the page we see Sal’s admittance of his own injuries and the pains he caused Terry.

The authorial Jack Duluoz makes a similar attempt to allow us to see his own scars and the scars of humanity. Duluoz, throughout much of Desolation Angels, wraps himself in the blanket of passive-woe-is-me ideology. For him, everything of this world, life, you, and me are nothing but a dream, for all is just passing through. Yet the authorial Jack lets moments of light shine in. Jack’s good friend Raphael spins on him in the streets of China Town about to cry because of the suffering of all. Jack writes,

And Raphael’s grimace meaks me a leak-tear right quick, I see it, I suffer, we all suffer, people die in your arms, it’s too much to bear yet you’ve got to go on as though nothing has happened, right? Right, readers? (DA 190 italics mine)

Jack points the comment directly at us. Do we, like his ignorant younger self, walk through life and “go on as though nothing has happened” or do we see the reality? Do we see the suffering, and are we going to act?

Kerouac calls us to act through the voice his narrators. He calls us to live an active life-faith of compassion. Faith, then, is never pure ideology, orthodoxy, or set doctrine for it is always evolving. Successful homemade faith is one born out of pain, suffering and lack of ecstasy. Homemade spirituality is created through suffering and collapse—wreckage, loneliness, anxiety and the angst—of life. Yet it is what a person does with this wreckage that determines success. In all three novels there are characters that encompass the successes and failures of Kerouac’s spiritual vision and ideal. There
are characters who act compassionately and then selfishly on the next page. This, ironically and poignantly shows that no one set ideal or dogmatic stance exists.

Life is in a state of continual becoming. When all is said and done characters succeed in moments of their life faith when they embrace the means and not the ends of a faith journey. By recognizing the scripts they are subscribing to, Kerouac’s characters can choose to change and act with compassion. In trying to burn the pre-packaged scripts of the American myth, misogyny, and blind following they step onto a true life-faith path of success.

For Kerouac, in these novels, when a person shows compassion, looks at the realities of life, and chooses action they have embraced the moment and the process of becoming. When characters admit that they were wrong in not taking care of the Rosies of this world they have made a positive decision in their life-faith. These successes must begin, however, by looking at the scars of their neighbors.
Works Cited


Stimpson, Catherine R. “The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation.”


Zelinski, Daniel. “Morality and Mysticism: the views of Dogen and Eckhart.”

[Princeton.edu](http://www.princeton.edu/~wildberg/Papers/Zelinski%20paper.pdf) 21 April 2005