

There is no place ...

Nebraska isn't perfect, but that doesn't mean it's a bad place to live

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Last weekend, I took what will probably be one of my last trips across Nebraska.

I'm graduating Saturday and moving to Brooklyn, N.Y., next week.

My softball team was en route to play in the Class F state tournament in Ogallala. On this four-hour drive, I couldn't help but wonder what makes Nebraskans themselves.

While thinking about it, I wasn't interested in the "humble people and apple pie" angle. Or the "Split identity made to be a chasm by the pull of the two media-aplenty U.S. coasts."

Those two popular takes put together makes us sound like kindergarten shrinks.

No, I was going to figure something else out for myself on this drive.

Interstate 80 was its typical conveyor-belt of multiple-wheeled rigs, minivans of families and Speedy Gonzales college kids in dated, two-

door cars.

The modest landscape, of course, was all crew-cut cornfields and pastures that look like chests and bellies covered with mildew-colored hair.

I rode with three other ballplayers in a minivan of our own; a white, industrial-looking one. All but the driver broke the Good Life state's open container laws.

The ride was pleasurable in a spoiled-sons-and-grandsons-of-dirt-farmers kind of way.

Computer programs, major league baseball and drive-by prairie scenes were the core conversation pieces in between slurps of Budweiser.

We chugged westward past all those exits that lead to shrinking boomtowns. Everything went predictably.

On more than a single occasion, one of us playfully read the town's name while practically singing with that "How ya doing. Haven't seen ya for awhile" feel.

Our pitcher, John, was the first man up to bat.

"Ba-e-e-e-aver-r Cuh-rossing."

That was it. No one really responded with a comment. We were

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just a bunch of Cornhuskers on the I-80 a go-go.

John said the name the way my Dad announces to himself that a person of old-time fame was on TV.

"Ha-en-ry Kiss-ssinger."

"Wi-ll-ll-eee Mick-cuuevee."

With those thoughts put together, I felt that maybe that I was onto something.

Nebraskans, more so than most cultural breeds, love to play on the grounds of familiarity. Just listen to the way the next person says "Bob Devaney" next time God's image is on TV. I don't need to spell the pronunciation out for you.

Here, the good life is about old friends with old names. New ones, we can live without.

Nebraskans aren't at all rude to

newcomers and outsiders. But as S.L. Price wrote in his ode to Tom Osborne in Sports Illustrated's retirement issue for the old redhead, we are strangely warm-but-detached hosts.

We're almost comfortable with being uncomfortable with the outside world. Psychological implications intended, Cornhuskers would probably identify with and vote for Nixon again.

I'm not too proud to embrace the Good Life with its warts uncovered. After all, aren't we Cornhuskers supposed to be a humble lot? Nobody's perfect.

I love our innocent sense of paranoia and distrust as cultural elements as much as the humility and apple pie stuff.

Bruce Springsteen saw it in us when he recorded "Nebraska," which is highlighted by the title song about Charles Starkweather.

The Boss, who was once married to a Nebraska woman, chose not to call his haunting album "Starkweather" for a reason. He thought there was a bigger picture involved with the killer's instincts.

Check out "The Rain People," a film by Martin Scorsese that has scenes shot here. Those particular clips are cold-hearted and frighteningly Nebraskan.

What makes all of this water under the bridge is the fact that this is a healthy state with nice people.

But, there's more to being a Cornhusker than 24-hour niceties. And it's easy for me when I'm here because I'm more-than-likely in the club forever.

I can barely wait until I hear the next time somebody says "Ckk-r-iii-s Hiiii-nee."

Whether I'm on the New York subway or a bar in my hometown of Hartington, I'll know I'll be hearing the tweaked originality of a Nebraska voice.

Mark Baldridge's
*How I Spent My
Summer Vacation*



Final Episode

The next chapter

Don't worry about your future, just turn to the I Ching

MARK BALDRIDGE is a senior English major.

I've spent my summer in stagnation, doing very little that might be called productive.

Which is funny because that's just what the I Ching said I would do.

The free, online version of the Encyclopedia Britannica (which displays only the opening lines from any entry - for more you gotta pay) has this to say:

I Ching

(Chinese: "Classic of Changes," or "Book of Changes"), an ancient Chinese text, one of the Five Classics (*Wu Ching*) of Confucianism. The main body of the work has traditionally been attributed to Wen Wang (fl. 12th century BC), sage and father of the founder of the Chou dynasty, and contains a discussion of the...

What it contains is a matrix of hexagrams, or figure columns of six lines, each line either broken or whole, Yin or Yang as the case may be, making 64 total possible figures.

Each of these is named and ascribed a certain interpretation with an appended and often inscrutable tag line ("Treading upon the tail of

“... the advice given was to 'withdraw into yourself, decline honors and riches.' Now I don't know about declining riches.

Certainly, I have had pitifully few offers of riches this summer, though the line could refer to my insistence on not working full time over the break, no matter how much it has cost me in terms of lost revenues.”

the tiger. It does not bite the man," and "The superior man discriminates between high and low," are examples given by the free, online Skeptic's Dictionary - which displays whole entries, gratis.)

The I Ching is an oracle, a book which professes to reveal truths about the future or any present situation which are otherwise hidden from the petitioner.

The means of consulting the oracle, finding the appropriate hexagram(s), vary but the simplest way may be to consult one of the free,

online versions of the I Ching, or downloading the remarkable if sometimes misspelled "E King" at: <http://www.acay.com.au/~icvision/eking.htm> if you like downloading things.

Myself, if I really want to know what the I Ching has to say on any matter, I toss three coins (actually, I use keys) six times and consult the table in the front of the battered, second-hand copy (in translation, by John Blofeld) I picked up years ago at A Novel Idea - where Kat tells me they still have multiple copies for

sale.

Now I'm not saying I believe that any number of broken or unbroken lines can predict the future but I've experimented with the I Ching on several occasions and I've found its comments enlightening, to say the least.

The rubberized sketchbook I've been toting around off and on since Christmas contains the results of several consultations and informs me that, on 4-24-99 I presented the I Ching with the question of the (then) upcoming break:

"What kind of summer will I have?" I wrote in my schoolboy scrawl.

The answer, for once, contained no "moving" lines (another twist given to the interpretation of hexagrams allows that one may be changing into another, resulting in reading two hexagrams for a given question) and so I had only one hexagram to look up:

"Number 12, P'I, Stagnation" was my answer and the advice given was to "withdraw into yourself, decline honors and riches."

Now I don't know about declining riches. Certainly, I have had pitifully few offers of riches this summer, though the line could refer to

my insistence on not working full time over the break, no matter how much it has cost me in terms of lost revenues.

Of course, if I'd asked the same question again, or simply delayed asking it until later, I might easily have gotten a different answer, but that's a less interesting problem than this: that the I Ching, in all its permutations, offers only 4,096 possible answers (I had to look this up, the math was far beyond my feeble powers.)

This implies that there are only 4,096 types of situations, which, if true, is remarkable in itself - though one would be hard pressed to say exactly how many kinds of situations one expected there to be. Surely the number cannot be infinite.

In any case, and for the edification of my reader(s) I have consulted the oracle again, asking it to:

"Describe my love-life for the Fall of 1999."

It answers with hexagram 42, becoming 16, which I interpret as: "You'll get more than you been getting," and "You ought to be happy about that."

To which I respond, "That won't be too difficult," and "I will be. I will be."