

Grief, the Road, and What Travel Taught Me

By Darnell Lowe, TTT Development Writer

This is a personal story, not a description of the TTT program. It's part of why our team believes so deeply in what structured travel can do — read on, and you'll see why we built therapy, coaching, and a supported plan around the same kind of journey.

Leaving

In November 2021, my mother passed away due to complications from COVID-19. Around the same time, the end of a relationship left me carrying heartbreak on top of grief. I began experiencing severe panic attacks that sometimes left me struggling to breathe or losing consciousness entirely. Living alone intensified the loneliness, and every day started to feel emotionally unbearable.

I knew I needed a change.

So I packed my car and left on a solo road trip across the United States.

At first, the trip was not about adventure. It was about survival.

I needed distance from the routines, memories, and isolation that had begun consuming me. I supported myself through gig work while traveling from state to state with very little structure or long-term planning. I simply kept moving.

One of my first meaningful stops was New Haven, Connecticut. After avoiding church for nearly two years, I attended a Sunday service on a whim. The pastor's message felt deeply personal, almost as if it had been written specifically for the grief and confusion I was carrying. For the first time in months, I felt emotionally seen.

As the journey continued through New England and down the East Coast, travel slowly became more than an escape. It became a space where I could finally process my emotions honestly.

Learning to feel it

In Portland, Maine, during a snowstorm, I experienced one of the most intense grief episodes of my life. Alone in a hotel room, I broke down crying while thinking about my mother and the love she had given me throughout my life. Yet that moment taught me something important: healing was not about

avoiding grief. It was about allowing myself to fully feel it.

Travel gave me room to do that.

Not long afterward, while still on the road, I learned that my grandfather had unexpectedly passed away as well. Suddenly, I was grieving two major losses within months of each other. I questioned whether continuing the trip even made sense anymore.

But in Richmond, Virginia, while sitting quietly near the James River, I experienced a sense of peace that I had not felt in a very long time. Nature, solitude, and movement were helping me survive.

The road trip was not easy. My car was broken into in Norfolk, Virginia. Shortly afterward, I totaled the same car in a highway accident. Standing alone on Virginia Beach afterward, emotionally exhausted, I considered ending the trip entirely.

But while watching the waves move in and out along the shoreline, I realized something important: despite everything I had lost, I was still moving forward.

That realization became the emotional turning point of my journey.

Rediscovering life

When I restarted the trip later, something slowly began changing inside me. The journey was no longer only about grief. It became about rediscovering life.

I stood overlooking the New York City skyline from Hoboken, New Jersey, realizing how large and beautiful the world still was despite my pain. I hiked through Shenandoah National Park surrounded by fog so thick that I never even saw the famous mountain views, yet the quietness of the experience still brought me peace.

In North Carolina, moments spent at waterfalls in Dupont State Forest and reflecting alone at Mount Mitchell reminded me how healing nature could be. For brief moments, my mind stopped racing.

There were still difficult days. In Charleston, South Carolina, I was involved in another car accident. On the same day, news broke about the Uvalde school shooting. That combination of personal stress and collective tragedy forced me to reflect deeply on how fragile life can be.

But there were also moments of unexpected joy.

In Jacksonville, Florida, I stumbled upon a jazz festival that filled the streets with music, energy, and life. For the first time in a long time, I found myself genuinely smiling without forcing it.

On my first birthday after losing my mother, I emotionally collapsed again while thinking about all the birthdays we had shared together. Yet later that same day, sitting quietly near the ocean, I felt comfort instead of emptiness.

That became one of the biggest lessons travel taught me: grief and joy can

exist at the same time.

"Travel did not erase my trauma or my grief. It never could. But it gave me space to heal, opportunities to connect, and proof that life could still contain beauty after devastating loss."

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A future again

As the trip continued, I began reconnecting with parts of myself that I thought had disappeared forever. I spoke to elementary school students about travel despite struggling with anxiety. I met strangers who showed kindness without knowing anything about my story. I explored cities, beaches, hiking trails, restaurants, museums, and communities that expanded my understanding of both people and myself.

Then came another emotional moment during Fourth of July fireworks. Watching the sky light up reminded me of memories with my mother, and I cried again. But unlike earlier moments in the journey, the tears no longer felt hopeless. They felt connected to love, memory, and gratitude.

By the time I reached places like Miami and Key West, I realized something I once thought was impossible: I was capable of feeling wonder again.

Travel did not erase my trauma or my grief. It never could.

But it gave me something I desperately needed during the darkest period of my life: space to heal, opportunities to connect, and proof that life could still contain beauty after devastating loss.

Most importantly, travel helped me rediscover a future for myself.

That is the impact travel had on my life.

Darnell found his own way through, alone, without a safety net. TTT exists to make sure no one else has to. Every participant gets licensed therapy, financial coaching, life skills training, and a fully supported solo travel capstone — before they ever need a plan built on the fly.

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