

27. Flat State of Mind

There are flat-earthers, who don't believe planet is a globe, even when presented with images from space; perhaps such facts don't inspire them much, as don't many other ideas to the vast majority. There are people who've never left Ohio, which is not high in middle at all, but featureless as fog as far as anyone can see and a lot denser than most residents realize. For dissenting viewpoints they shot youth dead at Kent State; last election their votes delivered presidency to a blowhard buffoon. There are bicyclists who can't appreciate value of topological curvatures and atmospheric observations they reveal. Moments worth all the effort were exemplified by sailing along wind-swept ridges surrounded by sky and breathtaking vistas of flatlands below a plane of etched glass ceiling. Recalled as a teen running into wind with a large piece of rigid board and nearly becoming swept off his swift feet, much like hang gliding into uplifts. Al never encountered a ride that was truly flat, especially where once glaciers scoured landscape and rivers still ran. Most rides were at least somewhat undulating, like a fluffy cloud of quilted mattress. Seldom can you merely free float. He had grown accustomed to flying down peaks anxious about stopping. Gentle seemed bizarre and curiously disarming, doldrums one longed to break free from to soar again amidst airy vistas and long expanses of emptiness.

To go uphill with the best, one must aspire to a higher thinking: advance planning, building cadence, and physically attacking. Racers mustering for a meet will do wind sprints uphill to prepare. Slight updrafts can be flattened figuratively by simply spinning up and hitting them hard, taking advantage of momentum. Others seemed to suck your tires like a vacuum, especially long inclines that gradually become steeper. On toughest hills, he shifted down to his easiest gear combination and forgot about it, stood on pegs, windmilled cranks as best he could, and wistfully watched scenery slowly pass. He puffed heavily, deeply inhaling green chlorophyll or scent of pine, exhaling hard, leaving a humid vapor trail in cold air, as if a tractor trailer bellowing smoke on serious grades. It was challenge with no easy answer, no instant panacea, yet curiously satisfying in a small way once concluded. One might be tempted to blow smoke and brag about suffering if these accomplishments weren't inferior and listeners indifferent.

Those who wanted to brag about mileage had to ride a lot of flat, Florida or windy Midwest. Flat straight roads are generally less

abusive than hilly, twisty ones. To fill their sails of self-propelled dreams, bicyclists had to know their rolls. Papa Hemingway made this clear: "It is by riding a bicycle that you learn the contours of a country best, since you have to sweat up the hills and coast down them. Thus you remember them as they actually are, while in a motor car only a high hill impresses you, and you have no such accurate remembrance of country you have driven through as you gain by riding a bicycle." Terrain can be adapted to suit, which is why Nobel invented dynamite, but mostly it's waves of windswept inconsistency. Visions of a bikeway anyone would want to use dissipate at the 1st serious ridgeline. The flatter a ride, the farther and faster one can go, unless wind kicks up against you.

He brainstormed an idea of promoting a ride he'd call "The Flattest Century for Free". Not exactly free, he'd require registration and ask for donations; any excess after expenses could be split among Bicycling League, Heart Associates, and Legstrong Foundation, thereby addressing America's 3 worst scourges, that is, if they weren't such ineffectual charities to begin with. Charities that are nothing more than clearinghouses for information ought to at least. He'd try and attract volunteers for the 3 obligatory 25-mile rest stops—two each would do—four people for the donation/registration desk at start, one sag wagon driver, and two arrowers. Who needs crossing guards, greasy snacks, and t-shirts? Could make up a limited number of nice cycling jerseys to sell. Give away anything that could be snagged from sponsors: bottled water, bracelets, Clif bars, ripe bananas and sport powders. These along with a map pointing out highlights, perhaps patches, would be all you'd need. Planned a press release and publicity on television; thought about a web site, too. By offering a relatively flat century, he was supporting public opinion. Cyclists he polled preferred flat but tolerated some hills. Quiet side roads to which cyclists drift were often steep, the reason they weren't overly built up with businesses, farms or homes. Cyclists had no choice, really, as their only option was to deal with terrain, get into shape. Successful hills are here to stay. It's up to you not to be part of the soft parade.

At day's end one can, literally, gauge a ride by what hurts. If it's your tail bone, then you didn't stand much, so ride was probably bereft of steep grades; long steady climbs grind your butt into flare of saddle; your feet, a lot of hard cranking against gravity; hands, braking and leaning forward on downhills. Knees and thighs never discriminate, always hurt, but high thigh cramps sometimes follow long flat rides. Pedaling hard, it was better to sit lightly in saddle, buffet bike's side-to-side sway with butt cheeks, but not actually

sit; this was less tiring, more efficient, and safer than standing. If you shifted gears before you had to, you were rewarded with usable knees after hilly rides. After a recoup day, pain lapses, panic expires, and planning for next outing begins.

Hills have merits that vary by season. In Summer coasting down country hills can be cooling fun after suffering smoggy wafts of asphalt aggravated air. But in cities, always keeping chain in big outside ring, which otherwise resembles a saw blade, by choosing flatter routes was a way to avoid gashes on right leg when cut off by ill-mannered motorists. Many urban cyclists are permanently scarred, a badge of honor, dead giveaway, thus tattooed as if prisoners or victims. In Winter, ascending is wonderfully warming while getting you into shape, but descending could be treacherous with brakes that hardly worked after rims are coated with ice and metallophagous road salts. Slippery sheets often form in low spots from repeated freezes and thaws. Cars can pack snow into an icy glaze from spinning their wheels uphill. Worst examples were on North facing slopes, where low slung sun has no chance to directly warm and hence providentially melt. This is why most ski slopes in his hemisphere face North.

Choosing routes to exploit these facts wasn't always successful. Even the most familiar terrain seemed to change over time, not as frantically as a waving flag, but just barely undulating. Your recollection of a long puffer might be erased by conditioned fitness, or simply come earlier in a ride when you're better equipped to handle. Slight inclines when thighs are blown out seem like climbing into stratosphere. Can't hurry on hills, need patience. Bonking makes for bigger hills in retrospect; even a shallow incline could break your spirit while wheezing on fumes. How flat a ride you recall often depends more upon your mindscape than real contours.

Weather turned rough with record snowfalls. Slowly cranking his bike on his wind-trainer indoors, amnesia began creeping in for Sundays outdoors. Could hardly remember warm days, all that balmy heat floating up, convection oven of concrete and tarmac, eyes burning, ugly fluttering green suppressing everything worth seeing. Ordinarily he didn't get too cold. Cold air seemed cleaner. Summer's moldy miasma was somehow desiccated and scrubbed away, and there were fewer cyclists about, so motorists noticed him all the more, yellow and charcoal contrasting against white snowbanks, yet likely expected him less. Donning a few extra clothes was just fine. Bibs tights insulate well and stay put. Along with base layers and a neoprene jersey, winter togs practically duplicated indoor warmth. Balaclava, booties and mask were necessary incon-

veniences which gave you extra time to reconsider your folly. Once streets became impassable by even busses and trucks, boring spins indoors had to suffice. Indoor trainers are still flat riding, even with increasing resistance. There's nothing quite like the incentive of a wall ahead: Too proud to walk up, too tired to stop. Just have to find a way. Pantani so hated it, Il Pirata climbed faster than anybody just to get it over with. Sometimes his old legs could only manage 30 rpm, barely winding mill, weaving in small switchbacks to sustain rising.

In Northeast, nearly all flat terrain had long since been deforested after 50 years of interstate, reservoir, and strip mall construction and talk of adding 40,000 miles more. Boys and gales felled everything exposed, and the needy freely hauled it off to build or burn, while hills and valleys protected themselves through inconvenience and inherent lack of laminar air flow. Tree-lined inland roads dampened gusts and whirls and made for better Winter riding. A steep hill between cyclist and prevailing gusts made for better progress than spinning on flat without, which knocked one about like a punch drunk prizefighter. Shoreline rides on relative flat only sounded easy until strong breezes persisted in a vector opposite your destination. Cross currents and tropical zephyrs can be a blessing during Summer, when groups of cyclists went far by catching tailwinds, as if kites, or drafting in slipstreams.

During a long ride with Pope Boys, he began to bluster about spirituality, a long slippery slope in itself. Most Americans have no interest, no matter what they claim, quite unlike the rest of World. Any bible thumping moral majority was never anything more than cloud cover in a conservative climate. Few actually practiced the primary tenets of their own doctrines: brotherhood, forbearance, tolerance. They attended churches and hollow ceremonies for show and to reinforce their grip on power. Africans, Asians, Europeans, Mexicans, Moslems, South Americans, probably five billion are devote in one creed or another. Only atheists, communists, nazis, pagans, and today's Americans turn completely from spirituality, because despotism, greed, imperialism, and rationalism are never virtues in any religion, which uniformly focus on blind faith, compassion, daily charity, forgiveness, generosity, good deeds, irrational happiness, sharing, and such acts of mercy that their browbeating clerics and mullahs don't practice themselves. When you constantly focus on defeating enemies, you forget serving those without fault. Predators strike when there's no police present; trying to interdict is like trying to predict hazy position of an electron in a nebulous cloud surrounding nucleus of an atom, something for which

Heisenberg developed an uncertainty principle. Better to spend your time on educating people how to behave well toward each other than trying to catch them in the act and punish. Teach them how to ride fast enough to avoid entanglements. Some will never get this concept, and prisons stay full upon advanced scientific investigative techniques: DNA profiles, fiber analyses, and whorl-arch comparisons, even though they parole offenders earlier than ever to avoid overcrowding. Buffeted by an automotive tempest, fabric of community billows in tatters. They identify you as pausing over a murder scene with nothing left but to rustle up means and motive. Proves nothing; in truth, most crimes go unsolved, although there's no shortage of poor scapegoats.

Once in predawn rain, while he was trudging up a hill well on right, an enormous pickup truck at back of pack grazing curb nearly nailed him. He watched all this, as if in slow motion, in his trusty rear view mirror. With nowhere else to go, had 3 seconds to unclip, step up on curb, and drag bike up. If he could have gotten plate number, would have sworn a complaint against driving to endanger, if it would've done any good. Who thinks of numbers when scurrying to survive? There's no reason for crossing white line other than incompetence or intentional homicide. Happens frequently, reported seldom. Bicyclists who don't use a mirror, night light front and rear, and sturdy helmet are taking chances. One airhead he told huffed back, "I'm adept at swiveling around to look." You can't see road ahead or back for an instant, and that's all it takes. Here was a case where he had to see both simultaneously. Had he not been wearing mirror, he'd definitely have been blasted.

Guess this is neither cloudy heaven nor firey hell, rather a sort of gaseous purgatory where many suffer so a few can thrive, versus a brotherhood of diverse people winging it together on limited resources on a finite planet courageously suppressing self-annihilation, somewhat like a huge dysfunctional family on an endless car trip at each other's throat, begging for a pit stop, running on empty. "Are we there yet?" Soon they'll all be falling by the wayside or pushing for all their worth, while criminals that caused their hardship hustle by obliviously in luxury sedans, tweaking their climate control to perfection. Barometer plummets, discontent percolates, rises like threatening winds until a hurricane of hate slams all in its path. By then, those who greedily profited have jetted away to mountain retreats and private islands.

All of humanity lives in a narrow troposphere a few miles thick around a planet actually in the atmosphere of sun, a 2nd rate star yet a gigantic unchained fusion reactor. Planets too close to

sun had all their air compressed into a poisonous thick acidity or evaporated into space. Planets too far had incredible turbulence, 100 year cyclones, frozen surface gas, or too little air. As in Goldilocks' trespass in Bears' boudoir, this planet is "just right" for human interlopers, but not without threats, especially if you slumber. People breathe in its life sustaining diatomic oxygen respired by biomass directly harvesting sunrays, nitrogen, and noble gases, eat off its growth, splash around in its waters. Environmental balance is crucial to life. But should a concern for preserving planet become an ethic that supplants religion?

Conservation had become a new demigod for the amoral. For politicians it's become a phony rallying cry, "I'll save the environment!" It's elevated into an obscene version of kissing babies. Their claim is totally ludicrous, since no individual can do that; only all global inhabitants working collectively can accomplish such a mission. A lone individual with a lever and a place to stand can only create havoc. Nature can wipe you out in a blink, will slowly rebound from your feeble attempts at extinction. Yet humans, no friend of Gaia, have collectively eliminated hundreds of species within a few generations. Conservation could be a means towards greater good, helping all of humanity and the wild kingdom they depend upon. But, instead, they tell poorest nations they can't develop their natural resources because it might cause climate change and damaging siroccos. America has spent its loess. Why can't they do the same? It's their right to blow what's left and those who've wasted theirs to suffer consequences.

Meanwhile, businessmen defoliate vast tracts of forest and jungle, fill landfills, pour raw sewerage into estuaries, pump oil and other wells dry, spray toxic effluvium, and weaponize nerve agents with nowhere to store them. If the hole in ozone layer is man-made through aerosols and automotive paints, North Americans made it, not Africans, Asians or South Americans. A better but mundane campaign slogan would be, "I'll strive towards balance." Clean up, for sure, yet preserve employee incomes by not making it so costly that businesses close. Preserve air quality by making municipalities buy precipitators as part of an inducement to lure power plants.

What's wrong with harnessing geothermal, water and wind power? Wind is seldom becalmed where wealthy like to sail, but the privileged tilt at windmills. Forgotten dams, races and sluices still exist alongside creeks and rivers, suitable for chains of milliwatt generators, but power companies roar away competition. Just a few feet below surface it remains a moderate 55°, and buried coils can preheat heating fluids as well as refrigerate air conditioning fluids.

This tasks compressors less thereby conserving electricity and fuel. Construction that absorbs heat and distributes it by convection and low wattage fans, solar panels that create electricity or heat water, and windmills that pump water or turn generators all further conserve and mitigate energy production. But simple building codes applying such well known properties have yet to be drafted.

Cities lag behind conservation measures, partly due to automotive lobbyists egging on loud, misguided morons. Robson Anders' 1% CAR Coalition sued for and won an injunction against San Francisco's municipal bike plan on the basis that there wasn't any environmental impact study. Rather ironic, using such a law against majority support for the only nonpolluting alternative. What about the environmental impact of allowing private motorized vehicles? Study that! Mental managers of Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard ban bicycles but allow cars, probably because they could afford a bike rack on outskirts but not a parking lot. Before Anders and cohorts rob your son of a breathable future, bicyclists ought to find out where they park, and fill spots with chained down ghost bikes and other inconveniences and reminders. Maybe they'll get it that mo-ves don't merit special treatment, horribly pollute, and take up too much space. Carbusters E-zine and World Car-free Network extol weekly car-free days. This could be the methadone that helps wean gas sucking addicts who can't help themselves. Ghost bikes he had deployed weren't well received. The 1st was stomped flat, others stolen altogether. Was it adults enraged by their message or kids frustrated by their locks?

Motoring could legally be banned altogether. Several towns in Europe already have, mostly medieval towns with no room for parking explored better on bike or foot anyway. Carfree cities or zones include Australia's Canberra Shopping Center; Belgium's Bruges, Ghent City Center, and Louvain-la-Neuve; Italy's Cinque Terre (5 small coastal landings); Jerusalem's Old City; Lithuania's Vilnius Center; Normandy's Mont St Michel Abbey; Spain's Laguardia; and Switzerland's Zermat among a few dozen similar alpine resorts and tiny town centers. In America, the only totally carfree places are Catalina Island off coast of Los Angeles, and Roosevelt Island in NYC's East River, rather ironic, being so close to country's most populous cities notorious for anti-bike policies. This is not to say that other American locations don't have dozens of small motorless districts and malls. Greece's capitol bans even or odd ended license plates according to date. To circumvent this scheme, most locals own 2 cars; others simply ignore it. Why did Athens do such a thing? Because exhaust pollution has all but

destroyed marble statues of Acropolis, ancient ruins of a high city atop modern Athens and 1 of World's greatest tourist attractions, although, a pity, not very bike accessible. San Francisco is another tourist city which would greatly benefit from biking infrastructure. Being very hilly, most people don't bike everywhere there. Cable cars are far easier than biking, driving or walking. What they're fighting over are public bayside places where road building is already banned. Here's a solution: Big parking lots in Oakland from which everyone has to take BART into city center. Get rid of cars altogether. Couldn't wait for some major American city to actually do this, stir up a cyclone of lawsuits, and storm this issue before Supreme Court. Indefensible motoring ought to lose, but at least the bribes and legal fees would redistribute some wealth.

A tornado, typhoon, or tsunami strikes, and dozens of grasping organizations circulate appeals for relief. But are charities chiseling better than tax revenueurs? Only difference is their thieving magnitude. Natural disasters ought to be attended by rapid deployment armies and World emergency agencies funded collectively from governments. In fact, there were already several such private agencies operating internationally—FEMA, Red Cross, UNICEF, World Health Organization—all of which breeze into half-gassed action. The problem with charities is they benefit someone other than victims. Who was collecting and where did it go? Every disaster becomes another opportunity to overstuff already full coffers. Much of it goes into advertising. If half of donations go to issue improvements and surviving families, be grateful.

Instead of trying to buy forgiveness, people need to redefine what they do. It's hypocrisy to give relief money when you don't tread lightly on earth yourself. Perhaps people should adopt a Green Acres mentality, get back to producing for themselves, or refocus on what's most important to life: dependable clothing, food, shelter to shop, study, work, and ways to get around safely. Greedy locusts bluster into town, devour all that's good from it, and disappear into the wind, leaving behind a dust bowl wasteland of failed businesses, half-built roads, and ruined lives. Locals ought to become active in their small communities, improve what they can, preserve its integrity, volunteer at disaster sites, work together. Too bad this would require giving up their flat state of mind.

