

8. Going as a Group

The phrase “risk assessment” never occurred as much to him out by himself as it did while group riding. Stability seemed relatively assured on 4 wheels, which suggested safety. Air bags, crumple zones, passive restraint, seat belts all fortified this impression, however erroneous. With only 2 wheels, all bets were off. Tiny patches of rubber touched ground or stopped wheels. Speeds sometimes matched those of motored vehicles. A rider had to balance, mimicking a tightrope walker, all too tenuous and, seemingly, dangerous, as if juggling chainsaws. Nothing protected you other than savvy to tuck and roll and wear a helmet. Add dozens or hundreds of others doing the same thing, perhaps not as well, in close proximity, it became a wavering jumble begging collateral damage. But it’s done anyway despite improbabilities.

During his teens, Al had the first of several mishaps resulting in collisions. Sure, there were plenty of near misses; he recalled one time, zipping along at great speed aided by a long decline, crossing into a busy intersection with the full legality of a green light. He assumed he’d be able to maintain momentum on flat beyond, keep a good pace, always an agreeable place, never a race. But motorists run red lights, one did, and he skidded to a panic stop. Luckily, it didn’t result in broken limbs or worse. Yet this incident provided a valuable lesson—assume nothing. Moving presents danger no matter what your conveyance. Just the other day, he had to skid to a stop while shadowing a car turning left without a signal into a one-way street out of which another car was emerging the wrong way. Multiply bad behaviors, someone was bound to get hurt.

One afternoon, trailing behind a stronger rider, not exactly pacelining, which implies a conscious effort in complicity with leader, he made the mistake of rubbing wheels. This had little effect on lead, who had swayed left ever so slightly across his tire, for an instant overlapping, but the centrifugal force and gyroscopic effect destabilized him, tossing him over handlebars as freely as jettisoning an empty beer can. Should one crash left or right? On right, at least you’re leaning away from traffic. On left, you save your derailleur from damage. Of places to land, he could’ve found something worse, a seldom tread lawn alongside a cemetery. How many visit graves of the dead? What’s the attraction, anyway? Just unknown names on stones, and you’ll be there forever soon enough. With a soft landing, rolling head over heels into an pile,

bike and he were basically unhurt except for his dignity. It wouldn't be the last time he'd suddenly find himself on pavement or in a snowpile.

You aren't supposed to pace then free wheel, but tightly draft while continuously pedaling. It's just that drafting is so much easier than out front facing air heavy against you, so followers in disturbed air sometimes do have to coast, even brake, so as not to run into leaders, who, like elsewhere in life, more often get in your way. Pacing is fine on flats, but it breaks down badly on hills, as everyone climbs differently and there's not much advantage to pacing uphill at slower speeds; downhill, only the best racers can pace at 60 mph and seize tiny advantages. The biggest disadvantage is following pack into bad cracks or potholes, which you can't see through them. You can't focus on pavement 25 feet in front, as you should.

One doesn't need a bicycling club to ride, so why did he join? Select posses with whom you go make you bolder to take on greater challenges. Going solo, you concentrate on exertion, pain, suffering and therefore clip your routes and question your own sense to preserve self. Surely his experience in groups had proven fraught with real pitfalls and sometime catastrophe. Nevertheless, he compiled a compelling list to urge participation:

1. Nice routes, well thought out
2. Maps available for current and future use
3. Safety net with other riders around
4. Other bicyclists alert motorists to your presence
5. Arrows or maps to follow
6. Biking expands mind; stuff to contemplate independently
7. Networking with other professionals
8. Urgings of others extend miles and seasons
9. Clean country air
10. Scenery seen not as a blur
11. Outdoor smells and sounds
12. Wild fauna and flora
13. Regular physical therapy
14. Weight loss
15. Improved appetite and sleep patterns
16. Incentive to quit bad habits
17. Something to do before game comes on
18. Momentary escape from domestic bliss

19. Better riders keep you humble
20. Suffering good for the soul
21. Gain independence from petroleum
22. Really get to know area you live in
23. Learn why naysayers are totally wrong
24. Lose addiction to comfort
25. Have fun

Here was the publicist talking, persuading “Get out and do,” promoting club. No sooner penned, he began to question it all. Routes varied from disagreeable to hazardous, even on the same ride. Suffice to say they weren’t all as nice, more chosen to offer close starts for club officers than for scenery. This struck him as foolish. Who wants to ride in the same area near home all the time? Routes out in virgin territory appealed more, far less boring even if more difficult to get to. Yet club officers cited “tradition” of repeating certain rides long after members forgot for what and whom that meant. Interpret this as a lack of diligent route scouting and imagination. Meanwhile, they cut their costs getting to ride starts. Club maps weren’t even that useful, poorly drawn, often inaccurate, and far too disorganized to serve as a model. If anything, there was a “danger net” of skillless beginners you quickly pass and speedy initiates who you’d never see again after the first climb. Mostly, they collectively clog arteries and enrage motorists, who then take out their apoplectic fury on you.

Arrowing was always spotty, no matter how conscientiously done, since that involved sticking your ass in air astride an active travel lane knowing you may be instantly run over. Who, in their right mind, would do so repeatedly? Especially after it’s treated with utter contempt by those served. What does an arrower get out of it? Club says, “Satisfaction of helping others.” Reality check: Expense of gas; paint on bike, clothing, shoes, vehicles; time wasted if conditions are bad on ride day; unexpected abuse from riders who get lost not paying attention; worry someone gets injured on your watch. What you feel is intense frustration. Isn’t all this the opposite of satisfaction? Why couldn’t volunteers claim credit for their deeds in any way they like? Brag about their community activism? Once called himself a member of advocacy committee having been duly accepted as one, only to be quickly denounced and slapped down. If you never spread credit to contributors, they soon don’t. If you go around attacking the character of volunteers, kiss good will good-bye. That’s how they lose respect. Incumbents never get this, or think it doesn’t apply to them.

They organize their cadre by function, one to make sure there were no toilet facilities at start, another to split up people acting friendly. Can't have riders making friends, perturbing them with chatter, or undermining their hateful schemes. Time for a change.

Networking with other riders, the only wildlife one usually encounters, that is, alive, excluding road kill, didn't help your professional reputation in the least. If anything, they conspire against you, if given a chance and not much effort on their part. They also act as a bad example, inviting you into drink, poor hygiene, and strange behaviors such as snot rockets and spit. Those you befriend ultimately betray you, get too clingy or let down their hair, and you often discover they're really crazy and dangerous, psychopaths or stalkers. There's no escape in this World, not from competitiveness, gloom of families spurned if only on Sundays, or knowledge of how poorly your roads are maintained after the incredibly high taxes you pay, practically half your income if you're middle-class. Safe bicycling requires your alert attention, a serious mind. If you can still have fun after these realizations, the good news is you don't need a lobotomy... You're already brain dead.

So, in keeping with his espoused point/counterpoint, yin/yang sense of balance, he felt obligated to compile an alternative version of his list:

1. Routes ransacked from authors' books without acknowledgment or appropriated by subsequently abused contributors, who thought they were being decent by sharing, fat chance
2. Maps available if you're lucky, don't ask, doled out, maybe
3. Beware—other riders around
4. Other bicyclists enrage motorists, who take it out on you
5. Follow route to some point where you get lost and have to find your own way back, perhaps in the dark; bring lights
6. Stuff to haunt you in private
7. Commiserating with other unemployed deepens anxieties
8. Overextend miles and suffer painful consequences
9. Suck down exhaust fumes and toxic road salts
10. Intimately experience factory wastelands and Superfund cleanup zones
11. Bovine stench offers a chance for testing gas masks, if you carry one.
12. Chased by rabid dogs
13. All pain, no gain, possible injuries

14. Weight disappears from everywhere but middle; bloated spider effect is charming
15. Too tired for food, sex or work
16. Reason to quit living
17. Doze off in chair, miss game
18. Permanent escape from domestic bliss after divorce
19. Be humiliated again and again
20. Suffering breaks spirit, leaves you with a sore butt
21. Can't afford petroleum after bike shop bills
22. Discover where you live to be a former landfill with toxic aftermath
23. Naysayers always underestimate the horror
24. Boorish chatter of new addiction drives everyone away
25. Torture

Having always to maintain balance, bicyclists were generally ambivalent on everything, a little schizophrenic at times, often argumentative and indecisive. Because people forgot how to ride freely, there is no lack of rabid enthusiasts eager to tell them how. They'll steer you into their world to justify their own dementia and obsession. Say, "No thanks!" Cyclists constantly tell others what to do. If others want to break laws, get caught, and pay the penalty, that's their prerogative. Rather than reproaching, cyclists are more than justified reporting motorists who mercilessly, recklessly and wildly wield weapons of mass, which makes riding really irksome. But they also carry their automotive moralizing over to innocuous cyclists and pedestrians, who've already had to endure enough of that from motorists, "Get out of my way!"

You could represent both sides of any issue, but people never listen, unless it's something they want to hear, whatever validates their misshapen perceptions or perverse sexual practices. Going among bicyclists meant public nudity while dressing and undressing, quick flashes of genitalia, urinating just anywhere. Couldn't be helped. In America, as Freud noticed almost a century ago, a prudish populace made public restrooms scarce. Now, cafes that dispense diuretic beverages, such as coffee, have done away with rest rooms—too expensive to keep clean. Where their wait staff goes, and washes its hands after, has become a mystery. It would be prudent never to patronize any establishment without a spotlessly clean restroom. Always go into restroom before ordering, if only to wash your hands before eating. Ask if they have one, and, if not, immediately leave.

You'd think the lure of men handling penises would bring out closet perverts eager for a peek. He'd seen them in locker rooms; wasn't exciting, a shriveled bit of flaccid flesh. Takes amorous suggestion or an aphrodisiac pill to get it to engorge. Any porno film or magazine gives you a detailed view, lit better, of superior examples, swollen aqua veined soldiers in storm trooper helmets; suggests bicyclists ready to race. Until recently, the curious were left to wonder, which built expectations. Glorifying female breasts, not the rest, is porno's real cash cow. These days anyone can troll the Internet anytime and get an eyeful, almost an anatomical lesson, all pink parts spread out like carcasses at a fishmonger; like fish, each is similar but different, yet all smell of low tide, something you don't sense from sanitized webites. A "neighborhood bike" is not urban slang for a communal conveyance, the proverbial white bicycle, but for a promiscuous pudendum upon which everyone has had a ride. "Mexican bicycle" is a perverse sexual straddling position. Selling sex devalues its allure, makes it seem disgusting, ultimately demeans humanity. Without drugs since 1970's stripping inhibitions, you wouldn't have widespread porn from 1990's onwards, much of which is not enchanting at all. Shacking up can become a shackle of paternity suits over unwanted pregnancies. Lovemaking should be for those willing to court and submit, relate based on compassion and desire to serve another needs. Prostitution is for the desperate and lazy, in other words, for contemporary men focused on careers or filthy sailors wandering between ports of call. Anyway, it's been said, "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle." Dangling flaps of flesh of either gender had no allure when your legs were burnt out and only slumber can revive your overworked body.

Yet when civilians see clinging jerseys and Spandex they assume gender bending. Spandex just happens to be a good way to get sleek, although it does embarrassingly reveal crotch bulge. Considering many forms of resistance bicyclists must overcome—friction, gravity, mechanical, and wind—wind is the most draining by far. Spandex simply helps air slip over you fluidly. To spandex they add wind resistant neoprene panels, so riding through cold air doesn't freeze your knees, as well as backside padding. Clingy and pliable, Spandex also frees your hips and thighs to glide. This apparel works fairly well, far better than dressing in street clothes with lumpy seams to chafe on. Civilians also imagine a saddle up your butt hints enjoyment. They obviously don't get it, since that's a major complaint. Then, again, bicyclists brag of bad falls, long distances, and permanent scars; they cherish complaining.

Bicyclists brave pain to find the rewards of better health and mental stimulation, partly from day tripping, partly from going outside among others similarly minded. Being with others rather than struggling alone emboldened and energized him to handle a few more hills, spurred him on through those gentle competitions people always subject each other to in semiconscious ways. Likewise, he encouraged companions to follow his lead. Worst possible scenario for newbies was to wind up with him as a guide, then have to listen to chatter, criticism about their technique and transportation flaws, and other such minutia. Newbies didn't know about charging at hills to crest them easier, or holding a straight line instead of slashing wheels from side to side, which chews up energy and creates danger for other riders, or properly maintaining bike, so everyone doesn't have to stop every few miles.

Transiting around travel snarls between dangerous urban points resembles gravitating between groups of reasonable individuals. Normal people go about their business with a smile. Must evade carloads of thugs or mad bicyclists who burst like balloons so air of their mania rushes out all at once upon you. Normal people don't antagonize a rabid dog, don't rat out their rivals, don't scribble thousands of pages about things that vex them, but, then again, normal people have friends and sex partners to while away hours. Controversial author Henry Miller said, "After a time, habituated to spending so many hours a day on my bike, I became less and less interested in my friends. My wheel had now become my one and only friend." Henry may have a gene or hormone or somehow been tainted by any one of a dozen factors, including fetal alcohol syndrome, that develop into Asperger's Syndrome, or Attention Deficit Disorder, or high functioning Autism, whose victims suffer from a desire to be alone, repeat ritualized behaviors, and scream inappropriately. He couldn't rule it out for himself or millions of bicyclists or novelists. Perhaps bike clubs collected such folks, and he suspected more than a few members would be diagnosed as such. But how do you explain why an entire nation isn't immediately attending to a 9 trillion dollar deficit driven up by Bushes and Reagan? Voters can't all be mental defectives.

The average age of riding club members exceeds 50, when cancer and heart attacks become concerns, so any sexual allure fades quickly amidst health issues and wrinkles. For perversion, you'll just have to turn elsewhere. This is not to say some cyclists aren't homophobes, homosexuals, lesbians, or sexual predators, all of which he did meet. It's just that it never seemed to be an issue any more than it would driving in traffic on a highway.

Why should anyone care what freaks and hairies do with “diekettes” and fairies? Who’s so offended that they must persecute those who are different? Probably only those who can’t stand temptations, wish they were doing the same. Everyone uses body parts in strange ways, crumpled into cars, flopped on sofas, stuffed with yogurt, suspended by wires, twisted into yoga pretzels. There’s nothing as odd in America as an adult pedaling a bike through snow in traffic. Biking blesses everyone who tries it to the consternation of impatient isolationists, and teaches gratitude for the tenuous boon of life, humility, and tolerance.

With his exhaustive knowledge of best local roads, you’d think people would want to follow him around. But every time he’d push ahead to block a major road crossing, those behind would cower, wait until cars passed. On one such occasion, after pulling up short then being subjected to motorist rage, scrawny chicken Janet Velosovitch squawked, “You’re a danger to yourself and everyone around you.” Motorists must stop to let cyclists and pedestrians in a crosswalk cross whether the light is green or red. If there’s a crosswalk, they don’t need a traffic signal, contradictory indications. The sensible thing to do is cautiously edge out then proceed swiftly, especially if someone is blocking traffic for you. Like other club insiders, such as brainless Brick Paver, who cower before cars, Janet has grown fearful and incompetent after recently crashing, then sticking mostly on country roads and quiet bikeways. It’s almost as if they rebuke themselves for not needing to bike more responsibly. Perhaps they’re guilty over countless motoring infractions for which they’ve never been punished. He didn’t deserve a tongue lashing after having once saved her life. But, the more you give of your art, knowledge or skill, the more they expect you to behave according to their prejudicial errors and stupid capitulation to automotive presumption. Reminder: He wasn’t put on Earth to entertain or rescue them. Soon thereafter, he made his excuse, pointed them in the right direction, and veered off. Riding with Janet was over for good.

Alienated, people can’t think of much else to do but steal from someone else who somehow got lucky. Disenfranchisement is why there are more people incarcerated than ever in America. Even very intelligent people are forced into solitary enterprises. This is why you see so many art works, books, music CDs, and the like, since a person *can* produce them solo. A few huge multinationals persist on inertia alone, glaciers grinding mountains of corporate mistakes into coy gravel no one much cares about.

For him it wasn't about riding around on a weekly vacation from reality with thoughtless club members who didn't give a damn about other bicyclists. It *was* about overthrowing the lazy, perilous, wasteful lunacy of motoring crammed down everyone's throat by greedy carmakers and their henchmen. Driving to club rides or painting arrows by car was hypocrisy. Those who did didn't deserve his help, held no authority, were just like any all-consuming flesh-eating bacteria, parasite, or termite. Those who spit on your offered hand dissolve into a liquid goo of those who you hold no opinion of whatever. Their names don't bear mentioning or remembrance; their faces conveniently escape your recognition or get too fuzzy to accurately recall out of the tender mercy of mental repression. Because everyone expects goodness, it doesn't impress much, though. Dogs don't forget punishment. Kick 'em and they'll never forget you, or take you for granted.

But what's writing all about if not human behavior keenly observed? This means you've got to mingle with crazies, dangerous in so many ways. He endlessly offered to be a ride guide knowing full well nobody would take up his offer. It was sport just to hear their fictional excuses, watch their confused reactions. All you have to do is carefully notice how people act, what they say, and make some sense of it, then you've got your dubious characterizations. But no story is complete without change, place, plot and possibly growth. Stories are for children at bedtime. Repeating them gives listeners the wrong impression and motivates faulty action, which is what an establishment feeds upon. Groups may appear to bring together, yet they also effectively isolate, concern themselves with tiny slices of reality, create "us-them" mentalities, make you wish you'd never meet another soul. Little groups don't necessarily lead to a grassroots groundswell that changes World for the better.

The majority of club insiders were upper class snobs with enough discretionary income to afford expensive equipment for several sports, bicycling when temperate, kayaking on hot days, skiing in Winter, and whatever they want involving hotel stays and trips abroad. They arrive in SUVs, or SAVs, Suburban Assault Vehicles, status symbols for the mean, a way of compensating for inadequacies—too small in other ways—and woefully inconsiderate and ugly. SUVs pretty much sum up an age where greed and rudeness rule. They joined club to escape: common drudgery, henpecking spouses, obligations to people less fortunate. Worldwide, the overwhelming majority of bicyclists are lower economic classes

who can't afford a high mileage gas swiller, never mind a new Italian road bike. Cycling elitists are so self-focused they've never appreciate this irony. Their hero, Texan Johnny Legstrong, does automobile and pharmaceutical commercials for piles of petro-bucks. Relative wealth never occurred to them as an issue any more than it would driving their fuel hogs on congested highways. Insight for them wasn't an option unless someone came along and stuck their noses into it. This is surely as good a reason to write a book as any.

