

12. Hitting a Nerve

Not to scare, enthusiasts don't recommend bicycling to just anyone. Wouldn't be responsible. Newcomers have to be somewhat attentive, competent and fit to treat a bicycle as an actual movement modality on roads alongside busses, cars and trucks. Thinking about it, bike hazards can be grouped under five headings: *Nature, Equipment, Roads, Vehicles, Exertion*—that is, *NERVE*, a risk set unique to self propulsion on a conveyance designed to offer the least resistance. In a society driven by the almighty automobile, this ain't stuff they teach in drivers' ed. Why not start?

Not surprisingly, on Internet where any kid can access countless sites on the excitement of driving, you can hardly find anything on how to drive safely. One was from the State of Florida, an especially dangerous venue with alligators in bogs on every corner, and police who enforce laws against bicyclists but not motorists. Other states were slow to recognize the cost savings of plopping data for download on-line, so they didn't have to pay postage. Conversely, bicycling sites were either paeans to races, which made it sound grueling as a sport, or poorly organized data on dangers, usually compiled by discreditable urban geeks, who, as if they worked for car companies, tended to obsess over what bicyclists do wrong. They certainly didn't seem to represent bicyclists' best interests. Telling the truth would take some nerve.

Mother *Nature* is a capricious old gal. No sooner than you get half way out, heavens open, a gale whips up, or a light mist turns into ice as thermometer plummets. While pedaling raises body temperature and water coolly refreshes, there's always a chance of chilled appendages, general discomfort, and hypothermia. Keeping feet dry is particularly important; waterproof shoes over acrylic socks help. Properly attired, you should never be afraid to venture forth. Just be aware of a few points. Bad weather is when mountain bikes shine. Slick road bike tires don't bite, while friction on wide tires is less when wet, so they roll faster. With puddles and wind slowing you down anyway, a racing bike isn't much of an advantage. Next, while you're at speed beware of floods, usually hidden in swales below a hill crest or down at base. Hitting them even as slowly as 10 mph may send up a wave which nearly knocks you off, like being hit with a fire hose. Avoid puddles, never knowing if they formed over deep, sharp holes likely to bend a rim or cause a flat. Also, oily pavement gets slippery with a light coat of rain,

almost like ice. Leaning back on saddle to get more weight over rear wheel can help increase traction. Weather reports are not usually specific enough to predict such microclimate changes. Finally, fog, hurricanes, snowstorms, and tornadoes are times for hunkering down and reading atlases, bike books, email, and mags about bikes, which coax you to ride but forget to warn of deep erosion along road edges, downed electrical lines, excess debris, and tree limbs immediately following.

Meanwhile, nature's emissaries yearn to greet you, especially man's best friend, the canine. Their jaws locked on your ankle really impede cranking, not to mention dangers of hurrying and swerving to avoid them. Incidents proved many, each a rush of fear and somehow narrowly avoided catastrophe, which he hoped never to repeat. But owners think their pets are entitled to prowl and attack at will. Civilly and criminally liable, they scoff at laws, as do motorists, with full knowledge that they seldom enforce violations which victimize cyclists. "How dare they ride by here?" Reggie described an incident which sidelined him for two years after a German Shepherd latched onto a buttock. This left a mental image of a monster swallowing tiny noisome Reggie whole, a butcher's scrap, a cocktail of shudders and squeals of delight, much in vogue as entertainment these days. To a lesser extent, cats, deer, skunks and squirrels also pose a threat, either racing across your path, freezing in front, or sashaying so as to make cars swerve into you. "What is it about skunks around here?" he asked. Can't go three miles through even the most heavily populated areas without getting gassed. Endlessly scavenging crows fatten on roadkill; as do other birds, they clear quickly. While they do harbor West Nile virus, a flock dispersing was more a sudden shock. By far the worst are insects, biting or swarming so as to get inhaled and choke you. In late Fall, slippery leaves collect in drifts to hide surprises, like beer bottles or curbs or gratings with killer slots. Darkness descends quickly to catch you off-guards as Winter approaches.

The *Equipment* you choose not only extends range but affects safety. Everybody knows too much about how to make a bike lighter and more efficient and not enough about how to make it suit one's own body. Bad bike fit can cause problems, from carpal tunnel to knee pain to male erectile dysfunction, although the latter has been discredited. After all, your most important equipment is your own body, your engine, which demands adequate rest, good nutrition, and plenty of fluid. People who do fittings often are selling a bill-of-goods: another accessory, a new bike, or an incomplete service.

Only you can tell how it's all works by how you feel. Install cleat slightly cocked and you might wind up on crutches. A common error is setting a saddle too low, though it can be too high, or not far enough back, twisted, unlevel, 8 possible incorrect orientations. Nevertheless, you can ride almost any bike to your corner store, which gives a false impression fit isn't important. A mountain bike with knobby tires might be bearable for 20 miles. But for distance over that you're into a fitted road bike with narrow tires.

Pedals for cleats, clipless or toeclips each have disadvantages. Clipping in and out repeatedly at intersections can be hazardous and tiresome. On the other hand, you wouldn't want to go down a bumpy hill and lose contact with pedals. With clipless improperly adjusted, shoes may sometimes slip out while climbing—ouch! Suddenly you're singing soprano. Cleated pedals are harder to clip into, and demand being seated. For short rides on flat, regular pedals suffice; they beat putting on special shoes which may impede walking. Distinct cassette configurations and double, single and triple chain gears give each bike a different feel, easier on your knees, or fewer derailleur faults. Wide, low-pressure tires get fewer flats, but skinny, high-pressure tires roll easier; when going far on good roads, he'd choose faster over an improbable flat. Although reports are rare, rims have been known snap on hard turns or potholes, solid carbon fiber spontaneously explode, or wheel otherwise collapse. More likely is a solitary spoke snapping or a wheel slipping off forks because it wasn't properly locked on. Wheelsets they supply with pre-built bikes—even expensive ones—are often junk. Similarly, frames, particularly aluminum alloy ones, can crack and fail. Brakes may fail. A broken brake cable can kill. Not only for stopping, you control a bike through brakes while pushing it or standing beside. Should head stem become loose, you suddenly won't be able to steer. You have to inspect brakes, cables, cleat attachment, handlebar tightness, rim cleanliness, tire pressure, and wheel lock before every ride unless you want a rescue ride to hospital or morgue. Frequent cleaning helps focus attention on component integrity, frame damage and loose parts.

Next to bike and you comes a helmet, then safety glasses, which, as proof, get nicked from stones and smeared by bugs that hit them rather than your eyes. Any pebble squeezed by a hard tire can shoot at considerable velocity 30 yards or more; there have been reports of cracked automotive glass. A rear view mirror, on glasses, handlebars or helmet, is also essential, along with conspicuous clothing easily seen and gloves, which cushion hands in a fall as well as upon handlebars. Good apparel colors are Day-Glo lime,

reflex yellow or white or combinations; solid colors are good under many conditions, particularly at a distance, but at dawn or dusk or in broken shade motorists can mistake you for a patch of sunlight. Check or strip patterns are unnatural, and thus draw attention. At night, inexpensive lights aft and fore, while only slightly helpful at illuminating road, at least make you more visible, as will reflective clothing. Kids should add elbow and knee pads. Padded shorts might sound more like luxury than necessity until you're far from home with abraded thighs and already a sore butt. Ditto for a caged bottle of fluid or camelback and a snack, because dehydration and low blood sugar make you dizzy, disoriented, off balance, and a target for careless motorists.

The two patches of tires that actually touch *Roads* measure only about a square centimeter. Because high pressure tires are swift yet frail, bicyclists spend much time inspecting roads for broken glass, debris, expansion joints, grate slots, ice, linear cracks, loose sand, manhole covers, nails, oil, parallel gratings, potholes, railroad tracks, roadkill, sticks, sunken pipes, thorns, well, the list goes on. Car tires are designed to roll over these without trouble, but bicycle tires must avoid. Though they make for a long ride, flats are tolerable if you can repair them without incident, but wheels locking into grate slots will throw you off; long cracks might cause you to lose balance. It's tough riding home with broken bones. Angling over slots may help but only if traffic allows. Always looking for hazards, you might forget to look up. Banged his head—explains a lot—on signs projecting over street, clear for cars but not cyclists. Roadnet leaves much to be desired. High speed traffic cuts corners, lanes suddenly disappear, and you're pinched into any of the above or worse. Long fast hills can cross busy thoroughfares or end at tees. Hills can be so steep you can neither climb nor stop. Debris collects at bottom, where you're rolling fastest. Where breakdown lanes tapered into nothing on corners and he couldn't fit between car and curb, he sometimes avoided them by crossing left, electing to take a side street, or entering a parking lot, where unclipping cleats was more convenient.

Risk management isn't just dealing with what you find, it's also planning your route. The best trace quiet long stretches with few left turns. He passed between dozens of cars, legally, with little room to spare, yet felt safe, but not where he didn't know what to expect, tapping brakes in unfamiliar territory, vehicles merging out of nowhere. Stop if you can't see dozens of car lengths ahead, behind and 'cross intersections. Know your route; drive it by car first; plan ahead when possible. Even highly accurate atlases aren't

100% correct; they indicate unpaved roads, proposed right-of-ways, and roads blocked by fences in the same way they indicate main streets. You can't plan only by map, even ones that show contour lines. A 25 mile route uphill may take as long as a 50 miler on flat. A map got him so lost in briars once, he had to call sheriff to beep car horn to indicate way out after being cut to ribbons and bleeding profusely.

As when you drive in a car, other *Vehicles* on road present moving danger, more brutal mass with damaging force. Bicyclists don't stand much of a chance if hit broadside, from behind, head on; don't get hit! Besides the obvious precautions—maintaining sensible speed, not weaving in and out from behind cars, observing traffic signals and signs, riding single file on the right in a straight line, and using crosswalks when applicable—there are some subtle ways to survive. Be aware motorists may swerve right toward you anytime, but often under 3 conditions: 1) Oncoming traffic, 2) road hazards, or 3) while passing vehicles which are turning left. Watch for vehicles not only ahead of you, but ahead of them, too.

Motorists are isolated and aren't always aware you're there. They're distracted by cell phones, family problems, radio noise, substance abuse, sleep deprivation, and succumb readily to malice against anything that might slow them down for even a second in blind ignorance of the law. Most don't understand that bicycles belong on roads or that bicyclists, too, might be impaired from emotional and physical tiredness. Watch driver's eyes; if not looking directly at you, avoid passing in front, or stop. He often swung around in back of them, then resumed on course. Parked vehicles may open doors into you or suddenly pull out. Beware; look for exhaust, heads, or lights. Buses and trucks, hard to drive, must keep schedules; don't get in their way. Big rigs are almost twice as wide as an economy sedan, which leaves no room for you. Worse than trucks, trains virtually cannot stop. While not much of a problem where he lived, in upstate New York and Vermont he watched them rip across roads without warning, a colossal steel sword hacked across your path. Stop, look, listen. A gardener's trailer is a special case; you can plainly see pickup truck hauling it, but the lower, wider trailer, usually painted black, will, unnoticed, rip bike from under you. There's a law, surely, that restricts a trailer's width to that of hauling vehicle. But, like one that demands a tarp over any bed filled with debris, it's seldom enforced, even though commuters get stuck behind substantial jams caused by spills. Bicyclists, as usual, are inconvenienced by debris worse than anyone else.

Hated to say, being a pickup driver himself, but trucks and vans, like the one left at World Trade Center, ought to be casually stopped and checked often for contraband, explosives, and those damn mirrors that stick out a yard. Smaller vehicles pose lesser threats, so should be held to lower standards, though often aren't. A known phenomena is one he called "the old one-two"; cars often come in pairs, a slow leader followed closely by an impatient, weaving shadow who can't fathom why going is slow, avoiding you! A related species is the curb crowder, who, too close to leading cars, can't see lines defining lane. Lastly, almost too cruel to bear, are other bicycles. In his own fiascoes, and those relayed by friends, bike-bike collisions dominated: cross checked, locked handlebars, pedals in spokes, sideswiped, struck from behind, wheel rubbed. Paceliners probably never realize how dangerous it is. Remember to ball then roll when you fall. Your main defenses are agility, awareness, helmets—mandated by law for 15-year-olds and under—and mirrors. Parents who send children out without helmets should be just as liable for prosecution as those who don't strap kids into car seats or those who physically abuse them, pretty much all the same.

As with any exercise, overindulgence can lead to extreme *Exertion*, heart attack or stroke. Before racing out as a long distance athlete like your favorite hero, consult a doctor, learn your limits, and train gradually. Who was he to say? Your wellbeing is your business. Take this advice or totally ignore. Be whole or drop dead. Have fun if you have the nerve. Worse hazards come from not bicycling. But you may become physically dependent. Once they've built leg muscles, lung capacity, and stamina, riders might actually go through withdrawal if they stop; chest pains and depression aren't uncommon. You can't build an ideal machine and not use it.

Despite these caveats, bicycling *is* a blast, a factory of fond memories, far more satisfaction than calisthenics confers, and fountain of youth that impresses onlookers. Cardiovascular disease, cancer and high-speed automobile accidents are the top three causes of death in America. Commuting by bicycle is the only activity that simultaneously combats all three. Not only do you get two workouts each day, which fights cancer and revives circulation, you're eliminating driving dangers while reaching your destination unharmed, if you heed precautions. Sounded good, anyway.

He offered this as good advice to protect bicyclists from harm, the kind of pap moms everywhere urge along fledglings. Every May, Cripple-A published some self-serving subset. They usually start these articles with how many bicyclists are injured and killed,

a minute fraction of those in automobiles, something they never mention. They advise cyclists to always give cars their right-of-way, despite laws to the contrary, stay single file as close to curb as possible, stop at every traffic control, and walk bike often where roads don't accommodate. They warn bicyclists to avoid bad weather, broken pavement, leaves, loose gravel, mud, opened doors, parked cars, and rides after dark. In other words, never ride your bike at all. For Cripple-A, bikes simply don't belong in their members' way. According to them, this puts onus on anyone so foolish as to ride and tempt fate. Nothing could be further from the truth, but they get away with it. What they never do is tell motorists to drive safer and share road, unthinkable. In same issue last year, Chapter President Mark Snot enumerated ways to combat higher fuel prices. None suggested, "Don't drive so much," since that, of course, doesn't suit their agenda. They take their members for suckers. Photos reveal all Cripple-A board members to be morbidly obese. Does a pattern emerge? It's like smokers arguing entitlement to legislate their addiction.

He stuck to his plan. Rode a bike about the same amount of miles/year as he drove. Preferred his frugal \$300 bike whenever practical over his thirsty \$18,000 pickup truck. Didn't own anything big or flashy beyond his means. Self made millionaires got there by avoiding ostentation, living modestly, making sensible purchases, and working hard. This is why sales of dubious status symbols stay few—profligate gangsters and recently rich. Good citizens prefer to use their time and wealth to act as paragons, back political action, continuously improve whatever they can, promote good health, protect environment, and transform life for everyone's benefit. The best people—fools and madmen—see wealth as poison unless evenly distributed, so they give it all away and prefer physical poverty and reliance on the good will of those similarly minded, following their savior's example. Unfortunately, this seldom works anymore. Press ignores or marginalizes them while they starve.

Those who need stuff to make them feel whole are emotionally stunted. Perhaps a few years in the Peace Corps or public service would open their eyes to widespread poverty caused by a few insatiable, self-indulgent individuals in industrialized countries. Drive your lane-pig with a cigarette dangling from blubbery, collagen injected lips, but, remember, somebody somewhere can't have a chance at life or a decent meal, and they are getting angrier every day. Why do terrorists hate you? Because all they see is someone who expects to own a Humdinger or SUV. Who is Mr. Humdinger?

If owners, feel sorry for them. If dealers, sell another brand of vehicle, why don't you? Probably not bicyclists. Those who spend over 350 hours a year bicycling among such vehicles could never defend these monstrosities with any conviction.

Consider the net loss—after gains from sales less health care costs and lost time—of just one vice: cigarette smoking. Costs mankind \$200 billion each year according to the World Health Organization. Mind you, that's a *net loss* after all profits. Think of what society could do with this money instead. Why tolerate smoking ever? So called rights for smokers make victims of everyone. If people didn't smoke, wouldn't opportunities be lost? Probably. But is that what people should do? Roll tobacco, cart cigarettes around, increase gridlock, staff hospital cancer wards. Without smoking, some real work could be done, like end hunger, fortify medical response, maintain highways, overcome despotism. The same logic applies to lane hogging gas guzzlers; better and safer without wide-bodies that can't share roads with bicyclists, pedestrians, people in wheelchairs, or smaller mo-ves. Can you legislate morality? Can't impose your mistakes on future generations even if your intention is to save them. Better to break the news about bad choices and convince addicts to reform on their own, vanquish vehicular vanity. Yeah, sure. Subject them to restrictions, and drugged/mechanized idolators would scream murder. By analogy, can't convince people to ride bikes either. You can only do it yourself and point the way.

Waste continues unabated. In the last election cycle just two presidential candidates raised nearly a half billion for ads aimed at constituents who don't want to listen. They didn't get any direct contributions from him, not even the vast majority of Americans, most of whom can't afford to give. This leaves corporations, foreign interests, investment banks, and the richest few, along with whatever they can raid from income tax and social security revenue, that great slush fund for dubious spending. An efficient way to decide between candidates is find out who spent the most and vote for the other.

It's a splendid privilege to live in a country that guarantees freedom of belief and speech, freedom from tyranny and want. People consuming resources and extirpating the environment are tyrants. People who tell you what to buy, do or think are tyrants, too. One can't tolerate either. Bad voters choose bad leaders, who appeal to their fears. It's a bad administration that turns everyone into emotional cripples. That's a phrase you can use, since everyone expects you to behave normally, hold your temper, keep under

control, as if anyone can define what these mean or preserve own mind from slipping into psychosis. Translated, “Hold your temper while I do asinine, injurious things to you with impunity.” He also blamed bike zealots who urge everyone to ride in prescribed ways out of fear. Bicycling’s benefits far outweigh its risks. Do it, not fear it, whenever, wherever you feel like it. Accept any free speech that argues balance somewhere between choices for individuals and the common good. When someone says, “Do it for the team,” ask, “Who on the team benefits?”

Too much choice leads to weird situations. His pantry was practically full of various infusions and teas—decaf, green, herbal, medicinal, mostly untouched for years, probably should be thrown out. He brewed the same black or orange pekoe time after time from dust and leaves in a jar on his kitchen counter. Convenience and familiarity aren’t always ghastly. He supported everyone’s right to buy a Humdinger (Families of 10? Ranchers? Wildlife researchers?), but chastised stupid choices made without a shred of sensitivity. Lawmakers agree. Attitudes have already shifted. By 2006 automakers must comply with a new bill mandating alternative fuel vehicles and higher mpg. Goodbye, Humtwice. Hello, Humthrice, a trimmed down version, neither of which runs on any isotope of hydrogen. This widebody fad seemed to have lost its appeal, anyway. Hopefully, gas guzzlers are fading into a foolish past. If they could only do something about mammoth empty buses belching noxious diesel soot driven as if drivers think they own the road, that would be progress. Maybe replace them with Humdingers?

Bus ridership shoots up when pump prices pass tipping point, \$3.50 per gallon, that drivers say they won’t pay. Since states collect huge gas taxes, any abstinence brings retaliation. Instead of making busses free for low income users, so as to beat back crime and fight despair, they eliminate routes and triple fares. They’ll do anything to keep cash moving in *right* direction, trickling upwards. Bicyclists don’t want to share the road with them anyway.

As far as substance abusers, drive them outdoors, keep them from public places, pay them less per hour, put those butt catchers further away from entrances, raise cigarette tariffs or restrict production, and, in short, resolve to make it as inconvenient and unprofitable to smoke as possible. Earmark proceeds to subsidize healthy activities. Let them move to France, where everybody bikes, drinks, expends no effort, smokes, and suffers one of the industrialized world’s worst economies. France had already reverted to developing nation status, a dangerously primitive state with nuclear weapons, something, about the only thing, it has in

common with America. Being an American citizen of French ancestry entitled him to say so. It shows self-contempt, the only acceptable kind.

Thus he ranted in nervy attempts at public service announcements. How arrogant can you get? Who hears his howls? One thing is certain, people hate to be told anything. Forget Descartes' Cogito ergo sum, "I think I am, thus I am." As roadblocks to communication forever stand ego, fear, jealousy and pride. All self help books are advice you can't take lest your ego be shattered. Men don't ask for directions. Instruction manuals and maps are a last resort. Fumbling around blindly is how most things are learned and realized, although it would be wise to consider that any reading of this book was not his adventure but yours.

"There's no need to panic," is the type of positive statement that causes panic. It evokes uncertainty. Why say it if panic isn't a likely outcome? Depends on the context, situation, and who speaks. Should a nobody spout off about immanent global change, that will actually happen, nobody will notice. Should a G8 Prime Minister or President of the United States open an emergency press conference with it, the entire World would collectively hold it's breath. It's then you'll be brave and calm from being grounded in reality. No matter how grave the prognosis, where there's life there's hope.

Truth seldom, if ever, emanates from the mouths of men. Deep in your heart you might hope there's a God, but you can never doubt man's inhumanity to man, a constant on this plane of existence. Probably the next is full of bicycles, devoid of motorists, and naught but carefree coasting on smooth surfaces. Or, as e e cummings invited, "There's a hell of a good universe next door; let's go." But in this vale of tears, watch your back.

