

CYCLE THERAPY

Our muscles have an elastic, durable memory. Once we do something, we generally know how to do it again. *It's like riding a bicycle—you never forget how.* With practice, the most improbable act can become second nature, leading us in new directions.

Although designed to complement our bodies, the bicycle appears antithetical to them: its straight lines to our curves, cold metal to our humid flesh, grease to our sweat. Cars and planes offer similar contrasts, but folk wisdom didn't pick them for its analogy. When an engine does the physical work, your muscles are flaccid, disengaged. On a bicycle, *you* are the engine. And whether humming along or in need of a tune-up, you are making a deposit in your muscular memory bank. (As my friend Steve O'Neill quips, "The bicycle is the true automobile.")

Nor do we embrace a car or plane with the intimacy of a bike—brazenly between our legs, sometimes for hours on end; heart pounding; sweaty fingers grasping for leverage; crank arms and quadriceps churning in energetic rhythm. People sometimes say they want to "marry" their bikes, only half in jest. A childhood bike lingers like a first sweetheart: *gold Stingray, metal-flake banana seat, streamers, bell. Rrrrrring! Rrrrrring!*

In addition to fetish object, the bicycle is an inherently social vehicle, moving us through space occupied by other people, whom we see at close range, for better or worse. The bicycle accepts the social contract like a marriage proposal. People who relish their commutes by car are often those who, for whatever reason, want a divorce.

The richest times in my life have coincided with bike ownership. Conversely, the most bereft were bikeless, like the eight years I spent in Baltimore, whose urban arteries are as inviting as expressways. When I moved to New York in the early '90s, biking here seemed just as suicidal.

After a few pre-Metro Card years of long-distance schlepping, however, I bought a used bike for errands. Soon I was riding with the Five Borough Bicycle Club and the New York Cycle Club, gaining technical skills and fitness, and seeing the tristate area far beyond my East Second Street apartment. But in the city, I was still too chicken to venture beyond my neighborhood.

That fear began to abate after my first Critical Mass, in October 2000. The ride also opened my eyes to the loopy free-spiritedness of our city's cyclists in their Halloween finery: blood-dripping monsters, flying pigs, even a pajama-clad man with his morning coffee. The rides' swelling popularity testified to how badly New Yorkers want this kind of nonmotorized, noncommercial, exuberantly imaginative experience.

In April 2004, I glimpsed what the framers of the Constitution might have meant by "expressive association," and it shook the passivity out of me. I was at the front of a Critical Mass ride headed down Broadway. At White Street, riders had stopped and were staring north with astonished looks. I turned and my jaw dropped as well, as more than a thousand cyclists surged toward us from Houston Street, 10 blocks away. For me, it was a clairvoyant moment, symbolizing the power of people gathering for a simple, shared purpose. (Do people in cars ever feel this way about each other?)

Four months later, the NYPD began its campaign to break the spirit of Critical Mass, but my transformation was irreversible. No longer was I afraid to claim my place in the streets as a cyclist. I began riding to work daily, getting that hour of exercise the surgeon general says we need. My relationship to the streets and to other New Yorkers grew fonder and more personal.

Most of my encounters with pedestrians (and even drivers) since then have been cordial or at least neutral (as is preferred by many zombified residents of the City That Never Sleeps). Brief but memorable incidents have left me glowing for months, like the megawatt smile one gentleman beamed at me as I waited behind a 42nd Street crosswalk. Or the sisterly wink from a well-dressed brunette cycling leisurely past me, in my

mismatched Lycra get-up. Riding down Third Avenue on weekdays, I often see a ponytailed man headed north, who always waves. We will never meet, yet we are comrades. The petite traffic cop under the Brooklyn Bridge greets me each morning with a smile as radiant as the South Asian sun.

Cyclists' constant proximity to mortal danger (aggressive drivers and jaywalkers, flinging car doors, potholes) makes us acutely aware of the dysfunctional design and mismanagement of NYC streets, compelling many of us to become activists on some level. This alertness makes us outlaws to some (or sanctimonious "holy rollers," as the *New Yorker* has branded us). But the way we see it, the city's reluctance to take control of transportation chaos, and some drivers' flagrant disregard for others' safety, amount to criminal negligence. What is worse: displaying one's moral conscience, or not having one?

Even the most self-righteous, fire-breathing agitator needs occasional downtime, however, and the bicycle lets us get away from it all, at least briefly. Riding to Piermont at my own rhythm—speeding along the straightaway on 9W, tackling the hills as best I can, observing my muscles, breathing, and moods over the course of an hour, or a day—is as much meditation as exercise or transport.

Of my four bikes, my favorite is a fixed gear—a bike whose single, rear cog is fused to the rear wheel. Unable to shift gears or to coast, it makes me mindful of every small change in terrain. Like a visit to a nude beach, the bike strips me of pretension: I either get up hills on my own strength and willpower, or I get off and walk. It engages every muscle, forcing my legs to turn mechanically, without interruption. Yet as they do, my mind wanders freely between daydream and focus.

I call it cycletherapy. The work—an excavation of muscular memory—is hard; I must look deeply within; afterwards I feel unburdened. Then I have a big meal and a good night's sleep.

Cyclists have different motivations for when, where, and what they ride. While our sample in this exhibition and catalogue is hardly comprehensive, it shows at least part of the spectrum of NYC cyclists. Whatever our differences, we have one thing in common with each other, and with bicyclists everywhere: We want to ride our bikes without getting molested, maimed, or murdered.

Every day, some 120,000 people ride bikes in NYC. And every year since 1996, between 13 and 40 of us have been killed by cars—wiped off the face of the earth, in most instances without the drivers receiving so much as a traffic ticket—while more than 300 are seriously injured. Cars kill about 160 pedestrians and injure more than 10,000 each year. (We are all pedestrians.) The "vast majority" of these crashes are preventable, according to Transportation Alternatives.

Over the past four decades, small but progressive improvements for cycling (bridge access; bike lanes

such as they are) have been achieved thanks to the efforts of hundreds of activists and certain enlightened officials. (See the Advocacy Timeline in this catalogue.) However fragmentary, these changes make a difference for daily cyclists as well as walkers, runners, and bladders. And New Yorkers do like to move on our own: 11% of us walk or bike to work, compared with a national average of just 3%.

But from a big-picture view, New York remains frozen in Robert Moses Land. The city's 10-year-old Bike Master Plan is just 23% complete. Our streets are ruled by millions of automobiles, with 860,000 vehicles entering Manhattan's central business district each day—that's just between 59th Street and the Battery. The NYPD turns a blind eye to aggressive, even lethal, drivers by not enforcing laws against speeding, illegal turning and parking, unsafe passing, and dooring. Instead of protecting us, it has invested three years, more than \$1.3 million, and a great deal of psychic energy in harassing cyclists who ride in the monthly Critical Mass. That this constitutionally questionable campaign has unfolded under a mayor who proclaims he wants a "sustainable" city is dumbfounding.

When will New York yield to common sense and join the worldwide movement for healthy and environmentally aware transportation? What is needed to coax us from our hard shell of resistance to principles of self-preservation, if not pleasure? Perhaps we could come to terms with our irrational, self-destructive behavior patterns with the help of a little group therapy. May I suggest that we start our session by getting on a bike and exercising our political muscles. It's said you never forget how.

Carol A. Wood
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