

A tyke on a bike powered by love

Bill Hall

Sunday, April 26, 2009

As the world worried the other day over its growing energy woes, I saw a small girl suffering through a traditional form of transportation powered by twin forces of nature - her own little legs and a grandfather's love.

She was maybe 5 or 6. And there she was on a bike path along the Snake River, riding a shiny little pink bicycle with a gray-haired protector trotting alongside ready to catch her if she fell. She was there with her grandpa doing what we all must do - what we all long to do at that age: She was learning to ride a bicycle.

That bicycle was hers alone. There were no competing brothers and sisters demanding a turn. It was her turn alone to master that monster toy, that little metal horse you have to break if you are ever to know the pleasure of speeding along under your own power, the wind in your face, the bugs in your teeth, the joy in your soul.

In fact, that first day with a bicycle, that learning day, is just a modern version of a youngster breaking an actual horse 200 years ago. And you have to break a horse of some kind if you are to widen your world by finding a means to cover greater daily distances than a human can reach on foot.

Some Great Bargainer has said to us for generations, "I will give you the speed, the power and the greater reach of a horse, but first, you must earn it. You must entertain me by falling repeatedly off the horse, collecting bruises and exhausting your steed, producing a rideable mount and a better mode of travel than your own feet."

A willingness to reach for a painfully earned control of animal power has been built into our human genes from centuries of partnerships with equine friends.

Not surprisingly, that compulsion has carried over into the bicycle and the car. What 6-year-old doesn't hunger for a bicycle? What 16-year-old isn't straining at the bit to drive and own a car?

It is a category of human yearning that includes the elemental appetite for flight. For eons our kind of creature has looked up at the birds and known a mixture of admiration and envy.

But planes are a slightly different matter. Not all humans long to be up there in the sky, especially when the normal human urge is to fly a cappella, spreading your arms and soaring. Flying in an airplane is passive - flying inside the belly of an aerodynamic tin can. You aren't a flier when sitting on a padded seat inside an airplane; you are cargo.

A kid on a bicycle is far more like a flying bird. A bicycle involves skill and effort on your part, not to mention the sacrifice of bumps and bruises and broken bones.

A ski bum I know once told me that the difference between downhill skiing and cross-country skiing is that almost everyone can learn enough on the first day of cross-country skiing to enjoy himself. But he said hardly anyone learns enough downhill skiing on the first day to go home without being sore, angry and frustrated at such a stupid form of so-called fun.

The bicycle is closer to cross-country skiing in that respect. Oh, at first, you fall over so many times that you want to beat the bike senseless with a large hammer. But by the end of the day, you're riding the bike - and loving it.

In addition, by that means, small children learn the stupid human trick of growing angry at an inanimate object and the salve of calling it names.

Learning to ride a bike hurts physically and emotionally. And yet we all do it anyway. We know what's coming and we are still eager for the bruises. No child in bicycle history has ever taken enough falls on the first day of biking to walk away and never try again. It's like gladly falling in love with no guarantee of a painless outcome. Everybody wants to do it.

There's a metaphor for life in there somewhere - getting ahead requires some courage and bruises.

But it hurts less if you're a small girl sitting on your first bicycle with an aging man running alongside until his old lungs burn, sharing some of your pain.

He's your grandpa, he paid for the bike, and he is teaching you, his baby bird, to fly on the two-wheeled wings of love.

Hall is editor emeritus of the Tribune's editorial page. His e-mail address is wilberth@cableone.net.

