

To the Dairy Queen and Back

a mythical ride through a familiar landscape

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MY TWO BOYS, ages three and six, love a good bike ride and I take them out often. We travel on a single vehicle that includes a bicycle, a tag-along, and a trailer. My boys call this elaborate rig the “Burley Train.” Come Friday evenings, if the weather is fair, we board in the garage and make the long trip north to a Dairy Queen.

We live in the Twin Cities about ten miles east of the confluence of two great rivers, the Mississippi and the Minnesota. Ponds and lakes sprinkle our neighborhoods; walk a few blocks in any direction and you’ll find geese along the soaked edges of an outfield or cattails crowded behind someone’s garage. Local maps—of Roseville, Shoreview, Maplewood—are checkered green, marking scores of parks and preserves, many of which are joined to one another by bike trails that weave along river bottoms and old urban rail beds, or, in our area, meander through the narrow wilderness of the Saint Paul water utility.

Soon after we’d settled in Roseville, I happened upon it—the soft-serve place at the far end of a trail that wanders through woods and marshes and emerges near the parking lot of an Xpress Lube. Late summer offers the best of those evening rides, with a hint of fall in the air and an early sunset that promises a return under stars. Each departure carries the charge of a real journey, with the boys eagerly clamping on their helmets and my wife trailing down to the end of the drive to wave farewell. She always lingers until we round the corner, hugging herself in the protective way of a person piqued by the deeper levels of goodbye, but also like someone standing guard over a rare treasure—in her case, at last, a little quiet time to herself.

Our ride takes us north out of town. Roseville is an older first-ring suburb bounded and divided by freeways. The homes of our neighborhood are based on a single template of a little house called a rambler. Each has a gambrel roof, oak floors, and, as far as I can tell, the same clock in every kitchen: a ring of red and black marbles on an aluminum face. If our developer were a poet, he’d have written nothing but quatrains. Peddling up the blocks past scores of ramblers, I play a game of searching for the exact replica of our floor plan. I’ve never found one. What an inexhaustible variation of rooms, windows, doors, and garages! There is nothing like the imposition of a little form to awaken our creative spunk.

I’ve noticed that our regular rides to the Dairy Queen have had a similar effect on me. As my body goes through the motions that carry us on our familiar way, my spirit takes to the vertical, exploring. Even the most ordinary of habits, done a thousand times over, offers such an opportunity. What routine is not a candle in a shoebox, made of the same wax that lights the altars

of ritual? For me, our Friday night rides to the Dairy Queen and back have become just that, a ritual.

Joseph Campbell calls a ritual the enactment of a myth. Though not as obvious as the rituals performed in a church or temple, the repetitions of our days contain as much. Life is full of them, these subtle mythologies. All the rides to Grandmother's house, coffee with a friend, supertime, the seasonal chores of taking down storm windows or raking up leaves—we are forever performing the rites of life's disorganized religion. Each routine itself is a constellation of even less notable tasks: pack the car, set out a plate, push down once more on the bike pedal. Yet however ordinary, they too would remind us that in the midst of a chaotic life, in the common sweep between our formal rites and ceremonies, we are living a deeper story. It's whispered in the tale we intuit in the face of a loved one walking two corners of a laundered quilt to our open arms, or there at the evening window where we pause with our hands in the dish suds and a feeling we cannot quite put to words. At such times, we might sense an awareness coming together, that we're at the edge of an epiphany, not only concerning what life is about, but what life is. But then the insight scatters—like starlings when the bread is gone—leaving us with nothing more to relate than clichés. These trickster-like moments remind us that we live at the surface of extraordinary depths. Our inability to will our way into the inimitable, grasping it as we might a fossil or an idea, produces an abiding ache. At such times we find ourselves in the strange position of seeming to know more than we understand, and so tantalizing an insight has pushed us in every direction, from madness to poetry. The anonymous fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* observed the existential loneliness these inklings inspire and called it our longing for God.

I once thought that embarking on a self-conscious journey was the best way to unveil and engage these deeper insights—to travel to another country, for instance, to be a pilgrim on the long road—and indeed such travel has awoken me to astonishing perspectives; but I've found it's not the epic journey that makes the opening possible so much as an attitude that it's likely to happen, that it's happening right now. There's that famous story of the man who wished to sit in the presence of a gifted rabbi, not to hear what the man had to say, but just to watch him tie up his shoelaces. That is the challenge: to learn to spot the exceptional journey in those routine trips down to our own untied laces.

RIDING NORTH, we follow the train tracks to the 694 bypass. The sound baffles, chainlink, and semis make a formidable border between our neighborhood and the marsh beyond. On the other side, just past a deer fence, lies a popular trailhead. For years, official access to this trail required a trip to an overpass about a half mile away. Most people, however, preferred the direct route, which includes a hike up through some poison ivy and then a bold trot across a busy train trestle. Finally, the county put in a pedestrian bridge that opened with a ceremony just weeks before the collapse of the Twin Towers. At that time, my oldest boy, Mathieu, was barely a year old. The Friday following the tragedy, I'd taken him out on one of our first rides, and we stopped on the new bridge. I set Mathieu on my knee so that he could stare in wonder at the miles of chrome and brake lights. As we gazed out I could feel the pall of shock hanging over all those cars and trucks. I

was heartbroken at our collective loss and at the same time had the sick feeling that we would not sink far enough into our grief to break ourselves against, say, the most profound teachings of Christ. Our nation has such a love for Jesus as a beacon of its own righteousness, but to see him as a divine mystery hidden in the shadows of our own projections, as a passageway to the mind's ground zero where the heart might be opened to something unimaginably new—that, at the popular level, remains a fiercely unwelcome consideration. With my son on my knee, I raised my hand to the fence and made a peace sign. I stood there for quite a while, eyes wet, making that old hippie gesture.

In the years since, I've often thought about that moment. My peace sign, I realized even then, profited from the presence of my infant son, an emblem of innocence. I remain ambivalent about having used him in that way—a shill for my convictions, however sincere. I understand the need to impart values to my children, to encourage them to participate in the manifestations of those values, yet at the same time I wish to be for them a space into which they can take form in their own ways, for it is in this space where the deeper stories live unadorned and without the cues of a religious tradition to inadvertently defuse their strangeness. The kingdom of heaven is all around us, and we don't see it. And what is this "kingdom of heaven" but the fullest perception of our integrity, born of strangeness?

The dogma of any tradition makes for a difficult tension: how do we adhere to its guidance, ethical or spiritual, yet remain wild within its forms—to practice constantly a kind of reverent irreverence? Concerning the education of my boys, I live out that tension daily: on the one hand I cleave to my own understandings of tradition and what is proper to instill in them, while on the other hand I act as an advocate for the objections they are too young to make. A child's heart is a window through which light can stream in every direction. As a father I must wonder, what will my words be upon that small world of glass?

On the far side of the highway, the bridge descends into a narrow wood. The trees, oak and cottonwood, lie between the tracks and the marsh. We glide along a pleasant mile, looking at cattails through the branches. Come early September, the cattails have burst and begun to yellow. At dusk, they stand like a world of broken hobo sticks. Among the trees the snakeroot, too, has gone to seed, crowds of it glowing in stripes of sunset so that half the woods seems filled with the heads of tiny saints. By the time we come out onto a small prairie, the sun is but a molten point slithering behind some radio towers. And then it's gone. Far across the marsh, the traffic lights float past one another, red and white, roses and lilies, those dueling colors of fairy stories. I follow the lights west, and feel once more the tremendous presence of the Great Plains. We are not on them, not quite, yet the very size of such a place so near creates a kind of geographical pressure on the spirit. At twilight the sky seems radiant with the prospect of touching a horizon commensurate with its grandeur. Indeed, at a place just hours to our west, a lone thunderhead towering into the stratosphere can appear as close to earth as a bed sheet lifting in the wind.

Sometimes my sons and I stop the Burley Train at this open place and lean it against the goldenrod. We find spotted knapweed to look at, rosehips and blackberries. The boys like to gaze back at the highway. They wonder where it goes, so we talk about the Big Horns and the Greasy Grass, or the Ohio River and the worn hills of Kerouac's "bushy wilderness" back east. Now and then we get into history, and I might spin an account of the early railroads, perhaps quote a few rousing lines from Gordon Lightfoot's "Canadian Railroad Trilogy." When they ask about the Indians, and what has become of their ways, I might recount the Sioux at Wounded Knee, speaking in the plainest terms. The perspectives jar, the language varies, and I let my boys fall into that space between. They fill it with questions.

"Listen," I say, raising a finger. "Do you hear it?"

They stiffen, and we hear once more: the elusive warble.

"A loon," I explain. I tell them straightaway we are lucky.

Nights later Mathieu says at bedtime, "We heard a loon on our way to the Dairy Queen—didn't we, Dad? We're lucky. Right, Dad?"

I turn out the lamp and touch his hair, my fingers in the radiance of a child forming his world.

WE CONTINUE OUR RIDE, pass through a culvert beneath Gramsey Road: a brief chill, a scent of basement, and much raucous quacking as the boys engage the echo; then we sweep into a small bay before a second woods. To our west, the sumac lift into the trees. I suspect the slope is an esker, a ridge formed by the interior rivers of glaciers. Its height hides the dusk. Our trail, meanwhile, enters a slit in the silver maples. This evening, some mist is growing among the mounds of raspberries that precede the woods. We go in, and I turn on a light.

The air smells of stumps and dirt. It's difficult to feel other than a visitor in this shadowy place. There is a faint air of reproach back in among the fallen limbs and beer cans, of a place set aside and then left to itself, a touch of wilderness, a slum for leaves. One can sense this estrangement in the woodlots that huddle along our interstates or border the spoil banks of new developments—all that Western culture has disowned, the things we fear or hate or refuse to understand, come to stay in woods like these and here they hunker down and wait. This uneasy collective shares a double occupancy with the native spirits, themselves cramped into these scraps of their ancient realms. The woods of this continent are crowded with our absence. And yet, above all, there seems to remain in these places a vast and dignified wisdom, one that not merely endures our slights and presumptions but accepts our complicated contribution to the destiny of this world. From such a perspective, every brownfield and poisoned swamp is sacred ground. Our Burley Train hums along through the shadows.

When we get to the Dairy Queen, I rest the Burley Train along the lighted windows. While Mathieu runs for the door, I help Alexi from the trailer. He is seated like Achilles, in a bath-towel cape and sword. A spirited three year old, he has come to appreciate the efficacy of a violent solution. He'd much prefer to pack gunpowder, but we keep him in the Bronze Age. Like most boys, Alexi and

Mathieu love to play at hunting and killing. I don't dissuade them from these natural inclinations, but rather watch for opportunities to help them reckon with the seductions and impacts of this energy and its three-million-year-old dance with the sacredness of life. At home in our playroom, our boys destroy whole cities several times a week, while in our kitchen they place animal bones in the trash as opposed to dumping them there, mindful of the life they once supported.

Someone might argue that I've romanticized swords, that they put a gloss on the ugly effects of violence. The objection reminds me of having read Prophets, all its rousing passages about oiling your shields and the like, and of an experiment I conducted that involved updating its more pugnacious images. Doing so gives each verse an unpalatably sinister cast. Consider Isaiah 49:2: "He made of me a sharp-edged sword / and concealed me in the shadow of his arm. / He made me a polished arrow, / in his quiver he hid me." A modernized version might read, "He made of me a handgun and concealed me in the shadow of his arm. / He made me a car bomb, / in his trunk he hid me." The contemporary associations strip the verse of its figurative possibilities and force a literal meaning. One might argue that, arrows or bombs, the context of the passage is ruthlessly tribal and unworthy of God. But the context of the passage is the context of a collection of books which altogether express our paradoxical nature, violent and otherwise, and whose true resolution lies not in any single image or idea however loving or destructive, but in our eternal engagement with all of these competing energies, and that through the difficult media of a poetic spirit and an open heart.

Of the great literary religions of this world—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—many have noted that its fanatics, among other things, are people who simply do not understand the poetry of their own traditions. It's as if God had shown them—through their allusive literature—the interplay of mayflies and their shadows upon a wall of evening sandstone, and all they can see are bugs on a rock. They miss the invitation to find their own way through the sorrow and beauty of the images to a spiritual perspective whose energy, always, is love. Instead, their response is to fortify the rock and make proscriptions concerning the bugs. So my wife and I allow for swords, whose literal function is to kill but whose figurative function, when properly engaged, serves as an effective grounding force to the male psyche.

But now we are at the Dairy Queen, no place for a sword, not even a rubber one. We must save our sword for the ride home, I tell Alexi. All we need here is a spoon. He considers my words and then, reluctantly, hands over his weapon. Later, standing unarmed at the counter, he tells me that he has super powers. Flying, I expect, or laser beams. But he says something less probable. In that articulate way of a child new to language, each word emerges perfectly formed, as if from the egg of a small bird: "You know what? If someone cuts me up I can drill a new hole for my bellybutton and put myself back together." I look at him. Now where did *that* come from? Apart from singing "The Cat Comes Back," I've yet to share with him a dying god story of any kind, but here it is out the mouth of a three year old. Such an experience reminds me of what others have so deliciously speculated, that the great stories and myths exist outside of us. They just are, like stars, and we simply happen upon them.

The softball season has ended, so there are not many people around. We go outside to sit among the empty tables. I lean backward, looking up. Jupiter, or Saturn, shines in the east, while the waning moon hangs over a Shell station. There is a premonitory coolness in the air that removes the urgency from eating our cones; one could lick for an hour, watching a few premature leaves skittering among the chairs. If there were a season to send monks out for soft serve, this is it. Mathieu, having demolished his cone, joins me in looking at the sky. I'm teaching him the constellations, but it's a bit early for that, at least in the city. I suggest we try to spot a star coming in. Both Mathieu and Alexi give a moment to this, but it proves a boring enterprise. Alexi abandons the table to walk along the retaining wall of a flowerbed. Mathieu is content to linger and puts in for a story. I marvel at the range of his requests—one day it's *Mr. Putter and Tabby Ride the Train* and the next, the book of Judges. For the longest time, he could not get enough of the story of Adam and Eve. Curiously, the part that most captivated him is not the instant of Eve's choice, nor that of Yahweh's discovery and anger, but rather of Yahweh's first appearance in Eden, his strolling through the garden in the cool of the day. There's that suspense in the calm before his cataclysmic outburst, but perhaps more captivating is the dramatic irony of that instant: the wonderful fact that in a few words, and for a few words, a child knows more than God.

But what he wants now is the tale of the White Buffalo Woman—something of this continent. And so I give it, her appearance before the two hunters and how the pipe came to the Plains Indians. The scene that fascinates him here, again and again, is the one in which the two hunters are approached by a divine woman. One sees her for the power she is and responds appropriately; the other lusts after her and is destroyed. The story moves on, past the dead man, but my son remains with the body there in the bluestem, a human who'd made a mistake. I find a touching correspondence between his fascination with the dead hunter on Turtle Island and that volcano of a god in Paradise: in the vast stolidity of the universe, in the blessed givens of Mathieu's life—parents, food, sunshine—there is a lethal whim. He has begun his long reckoning.

RIDING BACK, I put on all our lights. We turn from the avenue into the woods. About half a mile in, we pause at a clearing to watch a few deer feeding in a low mist. They gaze at us a while, then move along, unconcerned. One evening, near a utility pole, we saw coyote ears pointed our way, then a shake of tail, then nothing. The night is full of private agendas.

In the heart of the big myths is the dark passage, the Night Sea Journey; it contains the most ominous and mysterious places through which the hero must pass before the quest, whatever it is, can be fulfilled. One thinks of Dante going down, layer after fantastical layer, or of Odysseus, his ship sunk, swimming alone to Phaeacia, or even of the Ugly Duckling struggling through his long and awful winter. In one of our oldest stories, the legend of Gilgamesh, the great king—Gilgamesh—loses his friend in death. This throws him into angst about his own mortality, so he goes to seek a workaround in the faraway land of the divine. As part of his dark journey, Gilgamesh must run through a tunnel under the earth, the very tunnel the sun uses on its return from west to east. He must clear the tunnel before the sun heaves through—and (I spill the beans) he does so without incident. Yet among the many Night Sea images, I find this small passage

particularly haunting: the image of one man running for hours in cindered darkness, watching for the first light of another world while at the same time listening for the ominous rumbling of a star. In the old writings of the sublime and the beautiful, there's the observation that the difference between beauty and terror is largely a matter of distance. A single star on the horizon awakens a poignant joy, but much closer to its fires, the earlier joy grades quickly into a feeling more edgy and raw.

There is something to be considered here, this matter of perspective. As I pedal along in the darkness, our five tires crunch delicately over cinders. The boys are quiet, but I can feel the added ease of Mathieu's pedaling and, farther back, the pleasant kite-like bumping along of the bike trailer. Here we are, coasting along through a common woods on a typical late-summer evening; more broadly, we're three ordinary travelers on a small planet going round an average star adrift in a garden-variety galaxy—all this, in Buddhist parlance, "nothing special." Such an unremarkable moment is but the distance between me and whatever remarkable jolts and changes wait on the horizon; the prosaic moment is not separate from its transformative counterpart and whatever ecstasies or heartbreaks go with it, but is of those things, though their unfolding in the common hour occurs in increments so minute and suggestive they inspire neither worry nor awe nor terror, but rather a quiet state of mind that softens me to whatever is out there, to whatever is back in there: all the strange, spurned, and wondrous things. When I am attentive to these moments, they ply me like a poem, opening me in ways I can scarcely see. And yet how abundant they are; how regularly I am imbued with their company! To burst our surfaces, we needn't wait for weddings or funerals. The beginning of wisdom is everywhere around us, always.

We emerge from the woods and come out on the marsh. Once more, I pause to lean our Burley Train against the goldenrod so we can look up at the fresh constellations. Alexi is bowed over, sound asleep. As we stand by his trailer, Mathieu asks when he can start riding his own bike to the Dairy Queen. I tell him next spring, probably. I regard our rig, all its linkages, and see that an age is coming to an end. I ask Mathieu if he can find the Bear, and together we look at the stars over the woods. He has difficulty locating it, but as he searches he gives me back the Iroquois tale of how in autumn the bear receives an arrow and so colors the leaves with her blood, and how in winter she's a skeleton upside down, and how in spring she appears back on all fours, reborn. In his telling he gets a bit turned around and winds up gazing off to the south. I take the hilt of Alexi's sword, drawing it gently from between his legs; Excalibur coming up from the stone of my child. I use the blade to guide my older boy, helping him to find the Bear.