

## READING

Our reading this morning comes from the book, “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, an Inquiry into Values”

by Robert Pirsig

Mountains like these and travelers in the mountains and events that happen to them are found not only in Zen literature but in the tales of every major religion. The allegory of a physical mountain for the spiritual one that stands between each soul and its goal is an easy and natural one to make.

Like those in the valley behind us, most people stand in sight of the spiritual mountains all their lives and never enter them, being content to listen to others who have been there and thus avoid the hardships. Some travel into the mountains accompanied by experienced guides who know the best and least dangerous routes by which they arrive at their destination.

Still others, inexperienced and untrusting, attempt to make their own routes. Few of these are successful, but occasionally some, by sheer will and luck and grace, do make it. Once there they become more aware than any of the others that there’s no single or fixed number of routes.

There are as many routes as there are individual souls.

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**MESSAGE**

By Allen Giese



It's six o'clock in the morning and we're someplace in Georgia. We started out this morning at first light... actually, it wasn't really light. It was sort of that magical time somewhere between night and day where you could say it's the end of night or the beginning of the day and in either case you'd be right.

We left early because we're trying to beat the heat of the day. Yesterday was so hot that it took nearly everything out of us by the end of the day. So today we'll get our miles in and find a place to camp sometime by the middle of the day.

As the first light begins to penetrate the morning fog on the back country road we're on the only sound we hear is the swooshing of our rubber tires on the cool asphalt with each pedal down stroke.



No one says a word. We're enjoying the serenity and silence of the muted world we're in. As we glide over the gently rolling hills we pass a field on our right where horses are

playfully nipping each other's necks as they prance about... perhaps with the same expectation of the new day that we have before us. The air is cool and all we have ahead of us is miles of biking and unknown adventures.



I remember thinking at that very moment the line from "Field of Dreams"; Is this heaven?

One of my passions is cycling. To me, it's as close to religion as anything else. It's the often times literal mountain between my soul and its goal. It gives me peace, serenity and of course, plenty of challenges and without a doubt, some of the truth and meaning I've found in my life I've found through cycling.

I stole the title of this talk from a book that my son has found a lot of truth and meaning in... Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert Pirsig. It's an interesting book that chronicles the cross-country tour on a Motorcycle that is in constant need of maintenance of a father and his 12 year old son and intersperses the travelogue with Pirsig's philosophical thoughts and musings. The book has a lot to do with the author's battle with mental health and his son's early signs of the same. My son's been asking me to read the book for quite some time and I just happened to be reading it when Kathy put the request out a few months ago looking for service leaders. So I picked a Sunday that I figured no one would show up (thanks for proving me wrong) and used that as my title.



You know... I did this ride a year ago and one of the reasons I wanted to do this service was to analyze the ride and see if maybe I learned some deep spiritual thing from it. I'll give you the spoiler now and tell you that I don't think I did. I did, however, solidify some thoughts on how I feel about being a UU.

As UU's, our search for truth and meaning very much indicates to me that, for now, it's not about any heavenly reward or reaching our goal or a final destination. Most of us in our spiritual life I don't think have any idea what our destination even is. We just don't dwell on it. We tend to be more focused on doing good in the life we have now.

A friend I've known for a long time died a few weeks ago and I attended his memorial service. The service was a strong reminder why I'm a UU and focused me on this thought about our search and focusing our efforts on the life we are living now. Because for two hours I sat there and listened how it didn't really matter what my friend did in life. The emphasis was not on how he lived his life here on earth but on his reward in heaven. And he lived a good life! As a young man he was a bit wild but, as we were told, he fortunately found Jesus Christ, repented for the stuff he probably shouldn't have done and is now forgiven. We were assured by the Minister that as we sat there in attendance here on earth, my friend is, and I quote, at the feet of Jesus, wearing a crown in the kingdom of heaven walking the streets paved in gold. We were told not to feel bad for him because he's in a "better place." And all of us in that service could one day be in that same fortunate place if we simply atone for our sins, out loud, and believed in Jesus Christ.

And that's it. There was no other way in to this heavenly place.

Well I don't have anything against "believers" but I gotta tell ya, I was kinda bummed because that meant that heaven is clearly not anyplace here on earth, so I guess that excludes wherever we were in Georgia that day. I coulda sworn that was heaven.

But I also felt very much like an outcast in that large auditorium at that moment because, quite frankly, I'm not a "believer." At least not in the terms that the Reverend was preaching. If you're keeping score, I view myself agnostic. It just kinda makes sense to me to put it off until I can see what's what. And I've never felt like an outcast *here* for my views and beliefs. I can't imagine that ever being so.

But I quietly sat by myself and focused on the friend I knew and the good things I had seen him do while he was alive. That's how I want to remember him, not as one of the fortunate few who repented and is now wearing a crown walking the streets paved bright yellow metal with some guy that died 2000 years ago... and why is gold worth anything in heaven? That really puzzles me.

Everything we do as UU's confirms that we are not focused on doing good because we want that golden ticket in. We focus on doing good because it's the right thing for ourselves, the people we touch, our children and the next generations and the planet we live on. For us, it's all about the journey and that's what makes this denomination such a good fit for me.



When you are traveling by bike hopefully you do have a destination in mind but, like UU's it's not about that destination. If it were you certainly could find faster ways to get there... Bicycle touring is about the travel and adventure along the way.

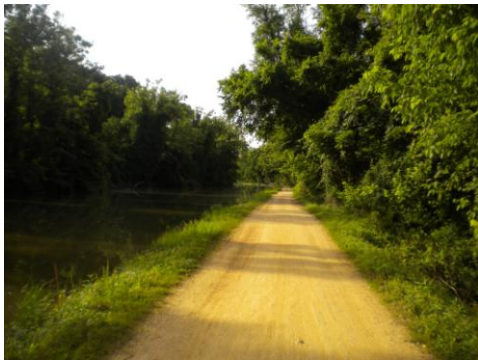
But this is the part that most people, especially before I left and told people what I was going to do... this is the part most people just didn't get. You're not traveling to arrive... your travelling to travel. To soak up the scenery and experiences of every mile as each mile evaporates beneath your tires. To slow down the pace of our lives.



Crossing over long distances and multiple regions at roughly 12 miles per hour you're forced to appreciate how gradually the landscape, the botany, the wildlife and the people change as you drift along. Experiences you don't get in a car on the interstate at 70 miles per hour and certainly not in a plane at 30,000 feet and 550 miles per hour.



Think about the last trip you took to a far away place. You probably got on the plane and in a matter of hours you got to your destination and got out of that big metal tube and everything was different... the climate, the terrain and geography, the people, the architecture. Now imagine watching all that change gradually over weeks or months instead of hours.



Watching the plant life change as the palm trees disappear and new flowers you're not used to seeing appear. Listening to the accents of the local people gradually change. Experiencing the gradual chill in the air as you wake up each morning further north. Seeing the animal life change. Unfortunately when cycling experiencing a lot of the animal life changes meant keeping track of the road kill we saw by the side of the road.



All changes so gradual that you don't even realize its changing until you take a moment to reflect how different everything suddenly looks. Nothing is the same yet everything looks just like it did yesterday just a few miles back.

So as Unitarian Universalists we're not so focused on the end all being everything. We tend to focus more on the adventure that life puts in front of us. And adventure means the unexpected, even if it's a bad experience, and making the most of the unexpected.

We're enjoying a wonderful ride through the outskirts of Richmond, Virginia... a little urban but that's how it goes sometimes. We're chatting along about who knows what and all the sudden my bike takes a thump, starts hissing and clanking as something huge is lodged in my rear tire... and sure enough... I stop, get off my bike



and this is what I see. Some sort of big hook that somehow pierced all the way through the tire. Needless to say, the tire was ruined. As we were replacing it and talking we realized... we were coming up on Memorial Day weekend. So we had an impromptu service for our fallen piece of equipment.





And not to belittle the significance of such an important day, but because of that bump or... spike in the road and the subsequent silly service we had on the side of the road, as we rode on that day we started talking about Memorial Day, and veterans, and sacrifices to this great country of ours that so many have made. It was a wonderful, Patriotic discussion where I learned the Bob, one of our companions, served in Viet Nam.



The stories continued through the weekend and into DC where I had the opportunity to walk through the Vietnam War Memorial with Bob and a new rider, Bill, that had just joined us who was also a veteran of that war. Listening to their stories and reflections from 40 years earlier was incredibly moving.



When we got to the famous statue at the end of the memorial and it was obvious that these two guys were very moved. They tried to describe to me how incredibly realistic and inciteful that statue was in depicting the rebelliousness and the different sort of character of the common soldier in that war than from previous wars.

I don't think I've ever had a more significant Memorial Day than that one, and again, it all started when our ride threw a curve ball at us and got us thinking and talking. Just like life. As UU's we're taught to embrace the adventure that life throws at you.

As UU's we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We believe you treat everyone with respect. Now I truly believe that most people, whatever their spiritual beliefs are, subscribe to that thought. We're not that unique. But you really find out if they live it when you approach them, wearing spandex, and ask them for help.



This will separate those that could be UU's and those that probably won't do so well. But you'd be surprised at how many people out there are willing to go out of their way to help you... even if you're wearing spandex!

We were having a really tough day one day. As pretty as the ride was



we were bummed because we had to say goodbye to Bob who just plain ran out of gas. After about 1,900 miles he was done and could go no further. He knew he needed weeks to recover and a rest day wasn't going to do it... so he made the decision to call it a ride. He was a great companion, always positive and just one of those people that is really easy to travel with. Definitely recognized the inherent worth in every person and treated you with dignity. So the three of us remaining, Bill the new guy, Caroline, a strong willed UU from Alabama and myself, were feeling kinda low. Then Bill ended up having the mother of all blow outs,



which is a very rare event for him. It was the loudest blowout of a bicycle tire I have ever heard, and I've heard a lot of them. It was actually so severe I think it was the cause of a crack in his rim we found, which meant we had to find a bike shop soon. The terrain

got very hilly and it was hot. We finally got about as far as we could go, which ended up being the town of Glenelg, Maryland.



Now I don't know if anybody here is from Glenelg, Maryland, but I doubt it because there is nothing in Glenelg, Maryland. No hotels, no campgrounds... nothing. But we were done. We had no more miles in us. So we stopped at the one-light corner that is called Glenelg, Maryland (yes, it really is a one-light town) where there was a convenience store on one corner and a bar on the other. So naturally we decided to stop in the bar, wearing our spandex, and see if we couldn't make any new friends who would point us to where we might be able to pitch our tents for the night.

Well, there were no UU's or even people eligible to be UU's in the bar that late afternoon. Our faith our fellow human beings was being challenged here. However, I'm sure we were the talk of the town when we left. But we struck out and decided to scout around to look for a place to Stealth Camp for the night. Now stealth camping, for the uninitiated, is basically camping someplace that's probably not typically a campsite and trying your best not to get caught. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

We remembered having seen a grade school a mile or so back so we figured that'd be a quiet place on a Friday night and the building could hide our tents from the road if we went around back. So we got to the school and that's where we met Scott. Scott was coming out of the school with his three boys in tow after their school play had just finished. I guess this is where the rest of the town was that wasn't in the bar. Anyway,

we started talking to Scott and the next thing you know, he's offering us his place just up the road. He has a big property with a small lake on it and an hour later



we were camped on the shore of that lake, drinking beers compliments of Scott, sitting in comfortable Adirondak chairs, also compliments of Scott, and watching 2 kit foxes wrestling by the side of the lake. Another slice of heaven when we least expected it... if only heaven were here on earth.

Now Scott obviously not only believed in the inherent worth and dignity of every person... he lives it and completely restored faith in our fellow man to three very weary travelers. You know, it's not enough that we talk about it... we actually have to practice it.

And that's one of the wonderful things about this denomination and especially this congregation because we do practice it, as we see our Service and Social Justice Committee has urged us on over the years as well as so many others in this congregation... we live our principles through service.

Now I'm not a real spiritual guy... I'm just not really wired that way. Perhaps the closest thing I've had in my life to a real spiritual experience was that bike ride. Maybe it wasn't so much a spiritual experience as it was a mid-life crisis, which I guess in itself is a spiritual experience, right?

Now I know I said earlier that I don't think I learned anything new that you could say was spiritual from it, but I'm going to take that back. Because over those two months out on the road, it showed me something in a unique way that I didn't fully realize.

What it showed me was how incredibly connected this interconnected web of life we always talk about really is. And not just in the planetary sense that I perhaps mistook the meaning of that being... but just as much or even more so in the people as well.



If you want to guarantee a conversation with a whole bunch of complete strangers do this... Grab a bike, throw a bunch of gear on it, get yourself all sweaty and smelly and then go hang out at a park, outside a grocery store or just about anyplace for that matter. If you want to, for good measure and to prove a point by taking it to the extreme, put on some really tight fitting bike clothing... it won't matter. Total strangers will come up to you and start talking to you! They'll ask you where you are from, where you are going and they'll tell you all about themselves. This would happen literally every day to us.



One Sunday morning in South Carolina we crossed paths with Eddy Rodriguez here, pulling a wagon and wearing a big smile. Eddy was walking from Miami to Washington DC to promote... smiles. His mission was to create more happiness in the world. Why DC? Because he thought, more than anyplace else, they needed more happiness there. We talked to Eddy for a while and had a great time.



And one day near Reamstown, Pennsylvania, right in the heart of Amish country I literally got pulled over by Marvin Showalter - he's the guy in the green shirt. Now, my two companions were ahead of me a few miles at that point and I need to tell you about my daughter here... Paige had been watching a show on TV before I left called "Criminal Minds" and she was convinced I was going to get mugged or something on this ride by some sort of psychopath. So as Marvin was trying to pull me over this is all I'm thinking... Paige was right! But it wasn't so... He just had to know what we were doing, where we were going and our whole story. He insisted on taking us to the big "Smorgasbord" and buying the three of us dinner! What an awesome dude! Again, IF heaven were here on earth and this was it, then Marvin must have been an angel... a little different looking than the angels in the picture books.



It didn't take long to hit me that whether you are in the Keys, South Carolina, Reamstown, Pennsylvania or just somewhere in the middle of nowhere, you'll realize that for the most part, we're all the same. We're all curious and we want to be connected. We just need something to break the ice... a reason to start talking to each other. And I think the bicycles loaded up with gear was just that... in a very non-threatening sort of way.

So to wrap this thing up, I'm pretty sure heaven is here on earth, pretty much all around us, and if it's not, what then are we doing here? If there is something even better than this beyond then I'm guessing it'll reveal itself to me then. But if all I have is more days like that day in Georgia and I can surround myself with people I love... well then that's just fine with me.

I'd like to leave you this morning with a poem by Robert Frost in hopes that it might get you to consider travelling just a little differently sometime in the future:





*The Road Not Taken*

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I marked the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.