

The Skinny on Cycling
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"The Life-Cycle"

I woke at 4:30 am on Tuesday to the sound of raindrops on my tent. It was my thirty-sixth birthday and I was on the second day of Adventure Cycling's bike tour through the Hill Country of Texas. As I was lying there, I thought about how cycling seems to intersect each of our lives at interesting angles and at the most unusual times. At thirty-six, I was the youngest on the tour. The oldest riders were in their seventies. Although there were nearly two generations between me and those riders, we all rode together, camped together, shared meals and conversation. I lay there a few moments longer and enjoyed the realization that, two days before, I had never met any of these people and how, just by being cyclists, we were almost immediately friends and there was a high level of trust and reliance among everyone in the group. To ride 350 miles together in unknown areas, you must learn to trust each other. Although away from home and family, I was going to have a great thirty-sixth birthday.

Two days earlier, I stepped out of a cab in McKinney Falls State Park and met a few really nice folks who were veteran bike tourists. This being my first-ever bike tour, I was relieved to know that I was among the company of experts. Along with Bill, Paul, Gary, Dave and several others, I met Charles Lally, a very quiet and reserved man who had placed his tent on the far edge of our shared campsite. Charles and I talked with some others during our first night together. Charles was an attorney from Cleveland, and he and I had something in common with the other mid-westerners on the trip. We talked a little about basketball, the weather, our families and, although a little perfunctory, it was a nice chat. After dinner, Charles sat at a picnic table nearby reading a book. I also sat down and cracked open a new copy of Henry David Thoreau's "Walden". I hadn't read it since college and thought that a seven-day bicycle tour would be the perfect chance to reacquaint myself with this classic.

On that first night, I read the following passage [edited for brevity]:

"Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new. ... One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned anything of absolute value by living. Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young...I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. ... Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it. If I have any experience which I think valuable, I am sure to reflect that *this* my Mentors said nothing about."

This passage stuck with me until the morning of my birthday, two days later. Although I generally think Thoreau had a lot of wisdom in his writings, he was just a few years younger than me when he wrote Walden. I was surrounded by cyclists, all my elders, who didn't seem to be empty-headed fools to me. Surely Thoreau had missed something.

During breakfast I mentioned to a few people that it was my birthday. Everyone wished me a great day and they started making plans for a little impromptu celebration for dinner that evening.

An hour later it started to rain as I was putting on my cycling gear for the day's ride when someone asked if I had heard the news about that fellow from Cleveland. Charles Lally had died in his tent during the night. He, apparently, had a heart attack following the rigorous 60-plus mile ride the day before.

A few minutes later, my father called to wish me a happy birthday. I stopped on the side of a rainy hillside park road while he shared the news that, only hours earlier, thirty-three Virginia Tech Students had been massacred by a lone gunman. I stood there stunned, straddling my bike in the rain as a state trooper and ambulance entered the park with lights flashing, sirens silent, driving slowly to Charles' campsite.

I don't remember much of the ride that morning. It rained. We climbed up many long hilly roads. It rained some more. That afternoon, however, we all ended up in Lukenbach, Texas about the time the rain cleared. We had a rest stop there and the staff, although reeling from tragedy all around, was cheerily smearing peanut butter on apples and energy bars, trying to make the best of a very tough day.

Throughout the rest of the week, we rode in some of the most beautiful country I've ever seen. Riding within a few miles of Armstrong's ranch, we all were excited to be riding the same roads that Lance rode as a young man. The weather was clear and warm and the winds stayed mostly at our backs. With Texas Blue Bonnets in full bloom, our spirits slowly but continuously rose and our new friendships grew and become stronger.

Today, the last day of our tour and late in the ride, I passed a bicycle leaning against a tree on a curvy road in Texas Hill Country. It was painted completely white, with the exception of the decal that read "Free Spirit". This bicycle stood in memorial of a young cyclist who had died on that very stretch of road. There was no sign to tell the world her name or how she died. However, all along her bike, in straight little lines were small stones, placed there by cyclists who stopped to mourn her death. As I placed a stone there, I realized that dozens of cyclists, just like me, had stopped at this memorial, felt a feeling of sadness and remorse, but then clipped back in and headed on down the road to see what lay around the next corner.

Now, only a few hours after finishing my first-ever cycling tour, I sit in a hotel lobby pouring out my soul and wondering if Thoreau was clueless in his preposterous claims that his elders had nothing to offer him. Then I re-read the passage and found its true meaning hidden near the passage's end: "Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me..."

Life is, indeed, a great experiment and there are no rules. Our risks and rewards are our own to keep and either relish or regret. We all fear death to one degree or another, but each day we get up and go to work, love our families and try to be the best people we can be. Many of us find that cycling intersects our lives--our experiments to great extent, untried--in strange and wondrous ways. Some of us will be lucky enough to die, in our sleep, enjoying the activity that gives us the most pleasure in this world. I'm sure that both Thoreau and Charles Lally would agree.

Charles J. Lally (1946 - 2007)

May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind always be at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
and rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.

-----trailer-----

Wade Wingler, the author of "The Skinny on Cycling" is the father of one adorable little girl, the husband of a beautiful & talented librarian, a Yogi and an avid cyclist. His web site, www.HowILost100Pounds.com features common sense advice on losing weight without suffering and improving your cycling through healthy living.