rhythm of the ride: exploring the everywhere in place

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EVERY MORNING I PASS THROUGH HORSE country in central Kentucky, the islands of Penobscot Bay off midcoast Maine, wine territory in eastern France, and the hilly dairy farm region near Binghamton, New York. In addition to mooing back at cows on the return leg of my journey, I regularly notice a sign affixed to a post in front of a weary-looking farmhouse sporting oversized, pale-green grooved shingles, an exterior sheathing commonly used in mid-twentieth-century America. The sign reads We Will Get Through This Together, undoubtedly a reference to the power of coronavirus to disrupt life across the United States. With over a million Americans dead, the ongoing pandemic continues to stress our healthcare system, close restaurants, and postpone concerts. New variants or permutations of the virus put large swaths of society on tenterhooks, with vacation plans, family get-togethers, and the delivery of educational services constantly threatened by changing circumstances. As a third autumn under the specter of COVID approaches, a yearning for normalcy—a world in which N95 displays no longer greet us at pharmacy entrances and masks are donned only on Halloween—and predictability punctuates our psychology. The rhythm of my daily bike ride serves as both rescuer and refuge as I search for steadiness in the seesaw world of the pandemic.

As I begin my daily odyssey, I pass a field of blueberry bushes on Windsong Farm, the site of a small pick-&-pay operation just a couple hundred yards down the dirt lane from our house. A half mile from there, having pedaled my way up a short hill, I reach the old Elliot School, a one-room schoolhouse. It closed in 1950, the year of my birth. Now a hilltop home with a pastoral view across a cornfield, its interior walls of slate, from which years of teacher-led lessons have been erased, continue to betray the structure's preresidential ancestry.

Until recently, Claudia Schmidt, who occasionally sang on *A Prairie Home Companion*, the popular National Public Radio broadcast discontinued in 2016 after a forty-two-year run, rented the former schoolhouse. Claudia's husband, Mark, owns a local recording business, Signature Sound. His work dovetails perfectly with Claudia's vocation, especially convenient during months when "social distancing" and home confinement prohibited giving concerts in public. Fortunately, she could still record professionally. My wife and I miss Claudia and Mark. Twice a week in the first year of the pandemic, they gathered several neighbors outside to practice yoga behind the old schoolhouse, a welcome physical, metaphysical, and social occasion when indoor gatherings had largely disappeared. But a year into the pandemic their landlady reclaimed her property. Both the demise of Keillor's Saturday night radio show, a reliably comforting two hours of singing and storytelling, and now Claudia and Mark's unexpected departure to another rental fourteen miles from our home remind me that predictability is always at risk, more wish than reality.

Riding on, I pass the old Elliot railway station located adjacent to a repurposed railroad bed now used by walkers, bicyclists, and horseback riders. Like the schoolhouse, the depot has become a residence, the owners' brown dog endlessly measuring the threat that passersby pose.

Toward the end of my journey, I ride past the red clapboard eighteenth-century home of ninety-nine-year-old Quaker Alison Davis, her most recent book, *Remembering 97 Years: A*

Spiritual Life, was published on June 11, 2020, the day after she turned ninety-seven. On Sundays her small barn functions as a meeting room where local friends gather to meditate. A sanctuary for many over the years, her home has served as a retreat for writers, spiritual seekers, and naturalists. In 1959, with the help of Alison and her husband, Wendell, nature writer Edwin Way Teale—author of thirty-six books, frequent contributor to the *New Yorker*, and winner of a Pulitzer Prize—and his wife, Nellie, purchased their nearby farm, Trail Wood. Fifteen years later Teale dedicated his thirty-third book, *A Naturalist Buys an Old Farm*, to Wendy and Alison.

Edwin graduated from Earlham College in 1922, the same Quaker institution from which I became an alumnus exactly fifty years later. During my college years in Richmond, Indiana (1968–1972), I would leave campus and head south, on foot, away from the National Road, an eight-hundred-mile roadway created by an Act of Congress in 1806, wending my way to the Abington Pike, about a mile from my dormitory. A distance runner, I regularly ran by a series of pig farms and soybean fields along that scenic byway. I particularly liked the first big curve I encountered. That stretch of road deserved the handiwork of a water colorist. Farm equipment distributed among unremarkable barns, small outbuildings, and a house, each embroidered onto sun-ribbed hillocks—together enveloped by the smell of pungent manure—prompted a subtle awe. Some would find the word "subtle" modifying "awe" an unlikely sequence, believing awe too dramatic, too imposing to be subtle. I disagree. Running through this serpentine section of road liberated me from the intensity of a day spent reading Plato, writing a biology paper on human courtship behavior, and meeting with my drama teacher, Arthur Little, to discuss Japanese Noh theater. Jogging along Abington Pike became a satisfying capstone to a day defined by my pursuit of a BA degree with a major in philosophy.

When I moved to northeastern Connecticut in 1979, I began running a six-mile circuit that took me out Fay Road, a rural road in, quite

coincidentally, the Abington section of Pomfret. More than eight hundred miles east of Indiana I found another stretch of road a mile from our house reminiscent of the bend on Abington Pike that snaked through the fields near Richmond. When jogging through this area, passing a broken-down barn and picturesque silo on my right and expansive meadow on my left, and just before the curve, I would often think of this narrow piece of Connecticut roadway as the Abington Pike. If running with one of my daughters, I'd sigh, then say upon entering that twist in the road: "Ah, Indiana!" One time my daughter Becky, also an Earlham graduate who frequently ran on Abington Pike, exclaimed, "You always say where you are is somewhere else." Since then, I have periodically reflected on the accuracy of her claim.

She got it right. That is how I experience the daily bike ride through Pomfret and Hampton, two small towns in eastern Connecticut's Quiet Corner, about fifteen miles from the Rhode Island border. Today, sliding by Sharpe Hill Vineyard on Wade Road, I see St. Croix grapevines stretch across the field, the maturing grapes only a couple months away from harvest. Yes, I am in France, even if an American. Introduced in 1981, Elmer Swenson, a farmer from Osceola, Wisconsin, and pioneering grape breeder, developed the St. Croix variety. French winemakers do not use the St. Croix, according to my friend Howie Bursen, an award-winning vintner at Sharpe Hill as well as a self-taught, nationally respected banjo player, stylistically a "frailer." Howie's wine rivals that of the best French winemakers.

Crossing into Hampton, I encounter a steep portion of Kimball Hill Road, a section I rarely climb easily and prefer to ascend either with an internal dialogue distracting me from my developing oxygen debt or the aid of a fellow biker telling me an arresting story. Upon conquering that hill, a second one appears ahead of me. As I force each pedal down and slowly surmount the rise, I begin to feel the ocean air brushing across the hayfield from the distant fir trees that obstruct my view down to Ames Crick, which empties into Southern Harbor in North Haven, Maine. The emerging scene triggers that recollection, and so now I am on the island of North Haven. As I work my way further up the hill, I am imagining Andrew Wyeth's disabled Christina, who suffered from a peripheral nerve disorder, crawling up a similarly barren hillside to her farmhouse in Cushing, Maine. A few miles further, as I pedal up a slight grade on Route 97, my eyes angle leftward, focusing beyond the flat, white ranch rail fencing across the road from stables on my right. I search the field for my favorite filly—shiny brown coat, her black tail swinging like a pendulum, muscles rippling—a work of art. "Ah, there she is!" I am again in Kentucky, where I once lived for three years.

Heading north, I cycle past Alison Davis's place. My mind drifts to thinking about her recent memoir. In it she describes her trip to Findhorn, a spiritual community in northeast Scotland on the Moray Firth coast. There she learned that each "thing has a spiritual quality and that makes it into a being. 'Something More' is found everywhere. The 'secret' of Findhorn is this continual finding of oneness." For years I have practiced the art of stillness in Alison's attached barn, where I have sometimes sensed such unity, an experience we Quakers refer to as a "gathered meeting." Inside that room I watch—with closed eyes and steady, restful breaths—the riches of a world go by while simply sitting upright, Quaker-style, with friends in silence. I am meditating.

Another half mile I push and pant to the highest point of this once-a-day excursion. On this summit, black-and-white Holstein cows feed on both sides of the road while others exit the barn, their udders recently relieved. I revel in the sight of rolling hayfields and deciduous forests many miles to the west and equally far to the east. Immediately, I am rolling through central New York State near the three-room house in which my grandparents lived in the 1950s, their home tucked between the Conklin and Hills' dairy farms.

After two more miles, either coasting downhill or pedaling easily, I arrive on Tull Lane, where at its terminus I live. Three-tenths of a mile to go. Cruising by the familiar tract of land on my right, on which I have grazed on blueberries for nearly forty years, beneath eight hundred bushes lined up like soldiers in parade formation, I see the ripening crop. The berry-laden branches of these high-bush varieties droop across grassy paths between rows. I will retrieve my bucket—with its thin, soft strap—dangle it from my neck, fade into the field alone, and pick iron-rich Early Blues for the next hour or two, rediscovering a solitude favorable to interior roaming. This morning I am everywhere, sensing a unity inherent in multiplicity yet pondering again my daughter's critique, "You always say where you are is somewhere else."

Pedaling daily the identical 8.2 miles—roughly three thousand miles annually—since the outset of the pandemic, my wife and I only missing four to six days each year because of icy conditions or unplowed roads, the daily excursion now qualifies as habit—but, also, much more than habit. Riding a bicycle involves balancing my body on two spinning hula hoop-size tires, a skill often mastered by kids under ten years old, as did I. Riding the same route every day engages me in the rhythm inherent in the rotation of seasons. Cycling demands the up-and-down motion of my feet as leg muscles draw the chain through the gears; pedaling freely mimics the unconscious inhalations and exhalations of breathing. My bike, as metronome, transports me elsewhere through the promptings of imagery I witness daily. It delivers one long beat every twenty-four hours, a holy cadence akin to the slowed-down heart rate of a yogic master, a meter that invites the "something more" I sense everywhere, a tempo that takes me "somewhere else" when I gaze anywhere, a rhythm that propels me to apprehend other worlds, if not netherworlds, inside every somewhere I encounter.