

Bikes and Testosterone

Did you ever notice that Springtime tends to bring out the stupidity in men? Or maybe it just brings out the stupidity in me. It could just be the fact that I live in Michigan. To say that the winters here are long would be like saying that B.B. King could play a guitar a little bit. Or that the Sears Tower is “kind of a tall building.” Winters here seem longer than it would take to fly to Mars—on a bicycle.

Long and cold. So, in the eyes of a normal Michigander (no joke, that’s what we call ourselves—or is it Michiganian, I forget,) spring is like the final bell on the final day of your final year of high school. It is a time to throw away all restraint and wallow in the ecstasy of not having to wear 40 pounds of fur. It is a time to celebrate the coming of something that you were sure was never going to arrive. It is new hope, new possibilities, new promises of stupidity.



I was caught up in the thralls of spring and decided that I wanted to try mountain biking. Maybe it was the television commercials that showed dirt-covered guys bleeding from both legs as they tumbled pell-mell down a cliff. In my spring-addled brain, I must have thought that looked cool. Or maybe I was just tired of having the use of all my limbs and full capacity of thought.

So, I got a mountain bike in my eternal quest to be “with it.” I shopped long and hard, looking for something that could be used for aggressive biking, but didn’t drain my already thin wallet. I didn’t want shocks because they took away some of the energy from every pedal stroke, I couldn’t afford aluminum, so I ended up with a good off-road bike with tires that would rip up the pavement.

I didn’t want to be one of those lame bikers, though, that had a super-cool, tricked out, extreme bike but never took it to any place more exciting than the local Winn-Dixie. After all, the TV commercials never show someone riding to the store, they are always out in the Sierra Nevada’s challenging rock formations. I lived in town though, and we had no huge rock formations, so I decided to challenge myself by riding some of the local nature trails.

Trail cycling is different than riding on a street as you could probably guess. It takes quick thinking, fast reflexes, and a certain amount of insanity. Well, I rode my bike without incident for a couple of weeks and was building strength—more than enough, I thought, to compete with some of the aerobatic antics of professional riders. So, I took the next step. I went to some trails located near my house that were a little more extreme. Well, “near” is a relative word—they were about four miles away. To be clear, I was not an expert rider and had not trained extensively—no matter what I thought, so eight miles was a good day’s ride for me. But the beautiful spring somehow told me that I could ride 16 miles that day. It lied to me.

I got to the trails, and rode around a bit. These paths ran for miles right next to a ravine. They curved around small bushes and up and down gentle hills. Everywhere you looked, there were tall grasses and wildflowers. The colors of spring had done themselves proud and the lure of unexplored wilderness called to me with its siren song. I explored with reckless abandon and enjoyed the ride on the mild swells. Then I got cocky.

There was a trail that led to the bottom of the ravine and emptied out onto a nice winding pathway along the creek there. That lone path was the only safe way to get to the bottom of the gorge. Everywhere else, a

cliff separated the top of the ravine from the bottom. This precipice dropped 50 feet straight down. The top jutted out, then was undercut for about 16 feet. Finally, the bottom stuck out slightly. The entire drop-off was covered with hardened sand, dirt, and rocks.

Eventually, I found myself at the top of that cliff. Maybe it was the fresh spring breeze blowing through my hair, maybe it was my overdeveloped sense of freedom, but something told me that it would be a good idea to ride my bike off the top of the cliff. I would free fall about 20 feet, then land almost vertical on the escarpment, gracefully steering past rocks and debris to stop at the bottom in a cloud of dust, raising my fist triumphantly in the air to celebrate my manhood! Unfortunately, my mind was writing checks my body couldn’t cash.

You see, we had been blessed with a torrential downpour a couple of days before I went riding. It was dry now, but it had left hard rivulets in the cliff where the water had rushed madly down in its hurry to get to the bottom. In the loftiness of my vision, I had failed to see these, failed to account for them, failed to think through the disastrous results that they would bring. Blithely, I turned my bike to the chasm, pedaled forward and soared through the air.

My carefree flight through the air lasted about a half a second. When I hit the ground, my front tire found the nearest crevasse, stuck, and sent me sliding down the cliff. I tried to grab onto anything that I could to stop my death plunge down the precipice. Failing that, I tried to disentangle my legs, arms and head from my bike. Realizing that, too was a lost cause, I opted to lay down on my side and rear end and allow the hill to sandpaper my bare skin to shiny smoothness. Fun, huh?

I came to a stop in a cloud of dust a bit dazed and confused. It had not gone exactly as I had planned. It had gone so far afield from what I had envisioned in fact, that I was afraid to move.

Well, as I lay there at the bottom of my stupidity groaning in agony, I took a mental assessment of my body—no broken bones, my head had been protected by my helmet, and no memory loss; I could remember every moment of my fateful tumble. However, I had given

the hill about 65% of the skin that used to cover the right side of my body.

They say that in the moments before death, your life flashes before your eyes. I don't know if that is true, but I can tell you that as I lay in the dirt at the bottom of that cliff, I could sense things more clearly. I could almost hear the wind whistling through the wings of the hawk as it soared. I marveled at the way the clouds formed shapes and patterns that were all unique, all different. And I was very aware of each and every nerve, muscle, bone, tendon and skin cell in my right side—because they felt like they had been dipped in gasoline and set on fire.

I realized that lying there pondering the wonder of God's creation wasn't going to get me the giant band-aid that I needed, so I slowly pushed myself off the ground—bruised, bleeding and yes, more than a bit demoralized at the obvious lack of “coolness” that I had exhibited. I took a moment to allow the dizziness to pass, and then I achingly gathered my bike, which fared much better than I did, and set off on the four-mile bike ride toward home. I've noticed that I tend to ride much faster when I am not skinned like a chicken and so the four-mile ride seemed like forty. Inch-by-painful-inch, I moved toward home.

At the time, my wife Pam and I lived in a little two-bedroom college apartment on the second floor. The kitchenette had four cupboards and two burners on the stove. Really. The bedrooms were about the size of your bathroom, and the entire affair had all the charm of a fallout shelter, complete with cement block walls. The building was built in the sixties, meant for two-year temporary use. But, as with most educational institutions, here it was, over 30 years later and still standing—barely.

I got back to my apartment, limped up the concrete stairs, and was met with an unpleasant surprise. I had no keys. I knew they were in my pocket when I left the house before the fateful ride. But alas, there were no keys in my pocket now! As I began to search my mind for where I could have lost them, I inevitably came to the same conclusion that you already have. I lost them on the cliff! My options were limited. I couldn't even crawl in the window because even if I could have somehow jumped past the first floor, stuck to the wall like Spider Man and made it to the

opening, these were the type that only opened eight inches. Admittedly I was somewhat skinnier then, but not quite that skinny.

After sitting down, wallowing in self-pity for a moment and exhausting all possible options, I realized that I would have to go back to the cliff and try to find the errant keys. I cannot tell you the warmth and cheer this beautiful thought brought to me! I was bruised. I was bloody. I was exhausted. I looked like a very underdone cut of veal. I was in no shape to go back out there. There was no other option though, so I began the journey.

The ride back to the scene of my embarrassment was grueling—made all the more so by knowledge that the possibility of finding my keys was smaller than the likelihood of a seven year old growing a beard and dancing the Macarena. As I stood in front of the cliff and saw the immense area that I was going to have to cover, my heart sank. The marks where I fell were embedded in the face, and they did not go straight down. Add that to the fact that much of the overhang was now loose sand, and I began to realize the keys could have been anywhere in a 700 square foot area and buried up to a foot-and-a-half deep in the dirt. My heart fell.

I felt that I would surely have to wait the six hours until my wife got home from work. Actually, at that point, I would have welcomed such an easy release. She would find me curled up in a ball on the front stoop unconscious from loss of blood. This probably was not the best way to greet my wonderful wife after a hard day of work, but I was beyond caring. I just wanted to pass out so that I wouldn't feel any more pain. Thankfully, God had different plans.

Forgetting that God said in His Word that if we sought Him, He would be found by us (Jeremiah 29:13 NIV), and that He cares for us (Nahum 1:7 NIV), I crawled up and down that cliff for over a half an hour. I had reached the point of despair, I was bloody, and the footprints I made had pretty much obliterated all hope of ever finding the keys. Then God had mercy on me and a thought came into my head: “This would go a lot easier with God involved.” So I prayed. I wish I could say that I was eloquent and spoke a spiritually moving prayer complete with “thee's” and “thou's,” but I think my prayer sounded more like this:

“God, help! I need to find my keys! I don’t want to die in the middle of nowhere, cold and alone while the bears feast on my flesh! Thanks.” Obviously, that was an exaggeration, it was spring. I wasn’t cold.

After that intensely spiritual prayer I turned around. I put my foot down and stepped on my keys! I would have whooped and yelled and jumped up and down, but I was just too tired so I bypassed the wild celebrating. Looking back at my physical state at that point, I can honestly say that was probably my wisest decision that day. I settled for thanking the Lord all the way home and limping into my apartment, to begin the laborious task of bandaging my many wounds.

Well, the scars have long since faded from that incident, but the knowledge that I gleaned from that experience with God is still with me. I learned a valuable lesson about God’s faithfulness that day.

God Cares About Small Things Too

God cares about the small things like keys. He cared that I was standing there on the side of a cliff, skinned like a fish looking for them. He knew where they were, and He cared enough about me to show me. Up until that fateful day on the bluff, I tended to think of God as someone that was needed for big things like life-threatening illnesses and world hunger. I would call on Him only in those times when my fat was entirely in the fire and there was no other option. I don’t know, maybe I thought that small things were too insignificant to bother Him with, but for whatever reason, I thought that I could and should only bring “things worthy of His attention” to Him. Make no mistake, He cares very deeply about those things. But God also cares about the small things. This is key. (Get it? It’s a play on the word “key” like the keys I lost that day, and also key meaning important...oh never mind.)

The reason it is so imperative to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God cares about small things is because if we can’t conceive of a God that cares about small things, no matter how hard we try, we will never be able to believe that God cares about big things. I know that some of

you are out there saying that you know that God cares about big things. It’s not a matter of just caring though. The reason we need God to care about our problems, whether big or small is because we need Him to act—to be able and willing to do something about them. And if we are to believe that He will move in all the areas of our lives, we need to be convinced He cares about our difficulties—even the problems we think are too small to “bother Him with.”

See, this type of confidence is not just thinking that something might happen, or thinking that God is able to do something. This type of belief is the kind of “suck in your gut, and step off the cliff” type that requires action. When we truly have confidence that God is going to act on our behalf, no matter what the situation, it changes the way that we think about the problem, the actions we take, the way we talk and the entire way we go about our lives. Trust that deep only comes from a lifetime of proving that God cares about small things.

For example, I found that I couldn’t be convinced that God was going to provide for a \$12,000 deficit in our finances unless I could believe that God cared about the five dollars I lost on the way to the mall. In the same way that you wouldn’t expect a child learning to walk to run a marathon, God doesn’t expect us to trust Him for seemingly impossible situations right away. God cares about all things. Big or small, important or seemingly unimportant. Experiencing this care is what builds our faith.

And when our faith is built up, anything is possible with God. Look at the verse that says: “If you have faith like a mustard seed, you can say to the mountain “be removed” and it will cast itself into the sea.” (Matt. 17:20 NIV) Conversely, if we don’t have faith, we close ourselves off to the supernatural working of God in our lives. Take for example Matthew 13:58 where it says “And he did not do many miracles there, because of their lack of faith.” (NIV)

When you begin to have faith like a mustard seed your certainty is deep enough to make a difference in your life. Reread the verse about the mustard seed. If you will notice, faith alone isn’t enough. You have to couple it with action—you have to “say to the mountain ‘be removed.’”

I'm not talking about something "spookinatural" here, I'm talking about a trust in God's faithfulness strong enough that you are willing to do what that faith requires.

Look for those small things where God was true and constant in your life. Find his faithfulness. When I have done that, I realize that my trust in God in those small things has prepared me for the next step that God had for me.

Because God was faithful in a small thing like the key incident, when something bigger came up, I was able to rely on Him in that. Luke 12: 22-31 talks about worry. In verse 24 it says; "Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them." (NIV) God feeds them. This verse almost makes it sound like God holds out his hands with food for the ravens. I can picture the ravens perching on His fingers and eating out of His hands.

This gives us a view of God that is caring, gentle, and yes, very concerned about the small things. Since that time on the hill, I have not hesitated to bring anything to God. Everything from feeling a cold coming on to incredible hardship and heartache find His ears. I am in no way perfect, or have this faith thing down pat, but when situations are at their worst, I perch on His able hands while he feeds me. (But I don't eat worms or birdseed for that matter.)

There was one last thing that I learned that day. This didn't have a whole lot to do with God, but it was a good lesson nonetheless. If you are standing at the top of a cliff with the aspiration to soar with the eagles, don't.