

“Portland to Portland”

Last spring, I was frustrated and fed up with fast paced Harvard life. I decided to stop doing what people expected and do something for myself. A few days after the spring semester concluded, I rode my bicycle away from the Pacific Ocean in Oregon and started pedaling towards the Atlantic Ocean in Maine. I carried everything I would need to survive on my own for three months – stove, tent, clothes, sleeping bag, and some paperbacks. Over the course of 83 days I widened my perspective on a journey of discovery - discovery of country and of self. I abandoned my anxieties in the cornfields of America, and I found unprecedented kindness and unparalleled happiness.

How did this happen to me? Late one winter night I stumbled upon an online bicycling forum with personal ads for touring partners. I furiously emailed people with plans to explore the Northern United States, but I received one response – an odd group of three comprised of a 61-year old man, a 45-year old man, and a 23-year old girl. My friends and family thought I was crazy for considering, let alone embarking on such a trip with people I didn't know, but I wanted an adventure. Over

the course of the two months leading up to the trip, we put together the details in emails and phone calls. Before leaving I often worried the trip was too risky, so I clung to our seemingly rigid schedule. “See Mom, on July 7th we’ll be in Buffalo, WY.” I acted as if everything goes as planned on a bicycle trip – I knew no better – but I soon learned that what makes a trip like this exceptional, is that rarely does anything go as planned.

I learned this when my group dissolved after two weeks when all three quit prematurely. I was travelling without a group in Yellowstone National Park. In the park I met up with a fellow cyclist, Ben, but I didn’t know him and our routes parted ways soon. I had no idea how I would navigate my way across the states with only some bulky AAA maps. I have an atrocious sense of direction. My mother nearly airlifted me out of Wyoming, but I was in Yellowstone for the first time, and I pleaded with her for a few more days. I reveled in the natural beauty of the park and the unexpected encounters with massive, powerful animals. It’s one thing to be stopped by a herd of buffalo crossing while you are in a car, but it’s an entirely different experience on a bike.

En route to the Tetons, shocking beauty bombarded me when I crested a hill and saw the mountains erupt out of the ground. After arriving at our campsite on Jenny Lake, I immediately stripped down, tip toed my way over the sun scorched rocks, and dove in. My limbs numbed, and I soon retreated to the shore and rested on my elbows while gazing at the mighty snowcapped peaks. I knew there was nothing else I'd rather be doing. My wheels would touch the Atlantic. My wheels must touch the Atlantic.

I convinced Ben that splitting ways was a bad idea. We travelled freely without much of a plan. Each new town was unfamiliar and lodging plans weren't made until dusk. Whether it was a meadow, firehouse, or someone's basement, we always found a free place to crash. I finally got over my inexplicable fear of asking for help and accepting it. In my darkest moments of fear, loneliness, and homesickness, strangers encouraged me and kept me going. Everyone I met, even if only for quick chat while filling up my water bottles, made this trip possible.

One day in Wisconsin was particularly rough – I was exhausted, the heat had made me cry, twice, and I wanted to go home. There was nowhere to stay, and it was getting dark fast. Out of nowhere, I heard a voice yell, “You look like you need a beer!” We screeched to a halt and accompanied a lovely couple into their favorite local brewery. They treated us to dinner and invited us to sleep in their apartment even though they were leaving town. Before they settled us in the spacious building, they bought us Gatorades, snacks, newspapers, and lottery tickets. They had even arranged for us to stay with their friends in Milwaukee. I never imagined encountering such kindness from strangers.

On August 23rd, 83 days after leaving the Pacific, Ben and I arrived in Portland, ME and ran into the ocean. I don’t believe beachgoers have ever seen such crazy dancers. That swim concluded an incredible adventure – an adventure towards happiness. Last summer, I realized that immense happiness could come on the sidewalk outside a Minnesota gas station while drinking a 64oz ICEE. Happiness, I learned, doesn’t take much. Sunshine, a good book, good music, and some food

were all it took. I wore three outfits and took baths in rivers. I stole free air conditioning and wi-fi from libraries. I lived in a tent on \$16 a day. I went to sleep happy every night because the last thing I saw were the constellations and shooting stars of a summer sky, and the last thing I heard were the birds and crickets singing me a lullaby.

(Pause)

I love Harvard. I really do, but when life gets hectic as it inevitably does, I stop, slow down, and remember – that everything I really need can be carried on my bicycle.