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June 15, 2000

**WHY I COMMUTE 33 MILES DAILY
BY BICYCLE WITH TWO TOTS IN A TRAILER**

Some say it's not possible.

But it is. I commute 33 miles a day with two tots in tow. Tot A, Benjamin, is four years old; Tot B, Abram Gabriel, is fifteen months old.¹

Others say I am insane.

But I insist I am not insane.² I reject the car culture and am dragging my tots along for the ride. Tot B is a big ball of happy fat, the sort of baby that makes people stop and stare and say, jokingly (as if this were the first time I'd heard this), "holy moley, why don't you feed that kid, you trying to starve him? Haw haw haw."

My bike has a "kiddie" trailer made by Schwinn that attaches to the bike frame; "motorcycle" style hand warmers that attach to the handlebars; a set of waterproof plastic bucket saddlebags³; a powerful Niterider Nickel Metal Hydride lighting system.

Tots A and B, plus their goods, my goods, and the trailer, weigh in at about 100 pounds. Impressive sounding, but not so hard to pull, really, once we're moving.

People feel compelled to comment when they see our caravan approaching.

"That's quite a load you've got there."

"You've got your hands full."

¹ Born September 10, 1998. Good boy.

² "Insists" he's not insane; always a bad sign.

³ If you had a pair of these excellent buckets on your bike rack, you could go get groceries *on your bike*. Available from Mike at Cobbworks, (360) 352-7168.

"That's a heckuva rig."

We barrel down the road; we have a lot of mass, we rattle, we rock, we roll. We got a mighty convoy.

Our bicycle commute route starts on dirt roads by our home in the Village of Corrales, New Mexico, winds down to a new bike path that crosses the Rio Grande toward the sunrise-lit Sandia Mountains, and flows through the valley; this bike path, which runs alongside the flood control channel, and goes only about a mile in traffic, takes me to the doorstep of the day care center at the University of New Mexico where Tots A and B spend their days. The vast New Mexico sky creates the blue dome that covers us through the ride. Then, two more miles across downtown Albuquerque to my office where I am a Public Defender⁴. Many of my clients are charged with DWI and other traffic-related offenses.⁵

⁴ I joined the Public Defender Department of New Mexico on February 12, 1998. It's fun. I go to trial a lot, mostly lose, but sometimes win. My most satisfying victory was State v. Frahmand; charges of Stalking and Harassing a female engineering student at the University of New Mexico. He emigrated here as a young man from Afghanistan and faced deportation if convicted. Deportation can be a much worse fate than jail. Seven witnesses, including the dean of UNM, faculty, administrators, all there to testify against my guy. Verdict: Not Guilty.

⁵ How to reconcile being a bike commuter, the nimblest but least protected of commuters, with my duty to provide diligent defense in criminal proceedings of Albuquerque's drunk drivers? I found some answers in this essay:

"A keen judge of human nature once observed that the Puritans disliked bear-baiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators. A similar phenomenon is at work in the moralists' campaign against drunk driving. If the moralists cared about the bear – in this case, people killed or injured by cars – they'd be more worried about driving *tout court*, rather than just the drunk variety. Indeed, the incoherence of the moralists' position is obvious to the most casual inspection. One hears, over and over, statistics of the following form: "In X% of traffic fatalities, alcohol is involved." So what about the other 100 minus X? What are they, chopped liver? – Well, close enough, in many cases. Sorry about that. But you see the point. Because they were catapulted into the next world by a sober driver, that's OK with the moralists. There's a more subtle lapse of logic here, too: That X% comes from analyzing the breath – or the tissue – of drivers involved in crashes. In X% of cases, there's found to be some threshold amount of alcohol present (choose your own threshold value; one's as arbitrary as another). So the assumption is made that because the booze is there, it must have caused the accident – or, more slyly, "contributed" to it...Now how can the causality be known? Well, the only statistical way you could even begin to establish a case for it would be to compare the alcohol in the blood of drivers who are involved in accidents, with the alcohol in the blood of drivers who reach their destinations without being involved in accidents. In other words, you'd have to know the background before you could tell anything at all from that X% you get from your Breathalyzer or your pathologist. But nobody, as far as I can see, ever points this fact out; nor has anybody ever tried to measure the background number. So what we know about the importance of alcohol as a factor in car crashes is... precisely zero. Then what's with all the hysteria? The explanation has to be sought in the realm of psychology. On some level, I think, we all know what a damned incubus the car has become. Movies tell the tale: cars get crushed, impaled, filleted, incinerated and drowned only less often than attractive young women. At the same time, of course, this realization cannot be permitted into the light of consciousness. The car remains a supremely potent fetish object, and the repository of a huge quantity of alienated libido – including that most volatile and high-octane form of libido, narcissistic libido. (An old girlfriend of mine, years ago, had a recurring dream in which her car turned into a bathing suit. A slinky, red bathing suit.) In a situation like this, a common mechanism of resolution is the splitting of the loved and hated object into two objects, a good one and a bad one... The bad driver is the

After cursing bad drivers on the way to my office, I shower, suit up, and (depending on your perspective) go (a) uphold the United States and New Mexico Constitutions or (b) fight to get them off for crimes, some committed with their cars.

Commuting solo is undoubtedly satisfying. To propel myself, under my own power, for a purpose, to get to work, is a wonderful thing, on so many levels; the environment, health, money⁶, the sensory⁷ and educational⁸ nature of the experience, the spiritual nature

drunk driver, the good driver is the sober driver. Everything would be hunky-dory if it weren't for the bad drivers – except, of course, for those 100 minus X% of the corpses; but presumably we just chalk them up to the will of God, or the laws of Nature, or the inexorable but ultimately beneficent Invisible Hand of the Magical Market.

I have a different paradigm. I think that instead of worrying about people who are driving drunk, we should worry about all the people who are driving-drunk; the people who are running around thought-impaired by the toxic influence of driving. This intoxication has a number of pathological effects on the nervous system. It makes drivers feel more important and more powerful than non-drivers, who can be bullied off the road, not just with impunity, but with entitlement. It shuts down the perceptual apparatus: all a driver can see of another driver is a metal shell. It impairs the capacity for projection and empathy; all the driver can imagine of another's motives is a primitive tropism to get ahead of the rest of the traffic. It distorts the driver's sense of space and time, and deludes him into believing that he ought to be able to get across town in ten minutes. It narrows his vision and shuts down his cognitive faculties, so that he'll accelerate to reach a red light fifty feet ahead of him. Compared to the drunkenness of driving itself, the additional impact of a convivial evening might well turn out to be trivial – if anybody ever studied the matter seriously, instead of just assuming that we know what's going on. But either way, the best scenario of all would be if the driver just stayed home and mixed himself a pitcher of Martinis. The hell with the car, and the hell with the Puritans. Michael Smith, *Drunk driving vs. driving-drunk*.

⁶ "The model American male devotes more than 1,600 hours a year to his car. He sits in it while it goes and while it stands idling. He parks it and searches for it. He earns the money to put down on it and to meet the monthly installments. He works to pay for gasoline, tolls, insurance, taxes and tickets. He spends four of his sixteen waking hours on the road or gathering resources for it. And this figure does not take into account the time consumed by other activities dictated by transport: time spent in hospitals, traffic courts and garages; time spent watching automobile commercials....the model American puts in 1,600 hours to get 7,500 miles: less than five miles per hour. In countries deprived of a transportation industry, people manage to do the same thing, walking wherever they want to go...What distinguishes the traffic in rich countries from the traffic in poor countries is not more mileage per hour of lifetime for the majority, but more hours of compulsory consumption of high doses of energy, packaged and unequally distributed by the transportation industry. Bicycles let people move with greater speed without taking up significant amounts of scarce space, energy or time. They can spend fewer hours on each mile and still travel more miles in a year. They can get the benefit of technological breakthroughs without putting undue claims on the schedules, energy or space of others. They become masters of their own movements without blocking those of their fellows. Their new tool creates only those demands which it can also satisfy. Every increase in motorized speed creates new demands on space and time. The use of the bicycle is self-limiting. It allows people to create a new relationship between their life-space and their life-time, between their territory and the pulse of their being, without destroying their inherited balance. The advantages of modern self-powered traffic are obvious, and ignored." Ivan Ilich, *Toward a History of Needs* (1973).

⁷ "I took care of my wheel as one would look after a Rolls Royce. If it needed repairs I always brought it to the same shop on Myrtle Avenue run by a negro named Ed Perry. He handled the bike with kid gloves, you might say. He would always see to it that neither front nor back wheel wobbled. Often he would do a job for me without pay, because, as he

of riding,⁹ the fun of it¹⁰.

But commuting by bike with tots is a richer experience with another layer of satisfaction. We are all in the trip together. A vessel venturing out before sunrise. I feel fatherhood when I am towing my tots with my own strength.¹¹

During our commute we can just stop and get out if opportunity presents itself. We never seemed to do that in a car. But on a bike, you're just "out there" anyway. My boy likes to stop to throw rocks in the Rio Grande. Those spontaneous moments are beautiful¹². There are a more of them on a bike than in a car. In fact, I can remember no moment of fun, *ever*, while commuting in a car. And most of the time I've spent commuting on a bike has been fun. Even in the cold and rain. Especially in the cold and rain.¹³

put it, he never saw a man so in love with his bike as I." Henry Miller, *My Bike and Other Friends*.

⁸ "A man learns style from everything, but I learned mine from things on which I moved, and as writing is a thing which moves I think I was lucky to learn as I did. A bike can be an important appurtenance of an important ritual. Moving the legs evenly and steadily soon brings home to the bike-rider a valuable knowledge of pace and rhythm, and a sensible respect for timing and the meeting of a schedule. Out of rhythm come many things, perhaps all things. The physical action compels action of another order – action of mind, memory, imagination, dream, hope, order and so on. The physical action also establishes a deep respect for grace, seamliness, effectiveness, power with ease, naturalness, and so on. The action of the imagination brings home to the bicycle-rider the limitlessness of the potential in all things. He finds out there are many excellent ways in which to ride a bike effectively, and this acquaintanceship with the ways and the comparing of them gives him an awareness of a parallel potential in all other actions. Out of the action of imagination also comes music and memory. On the way I found out all things without which I could never be the writer I am. I was not yet sixteen when I understood a great deal, from having ridden bicycles for so long, about style, speed, grace, purpose, value, form, integrity, health, humor, music, breathing, and finally and perhaps best of the relationship between the beginning and the end." William Saroyan, *The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills* (1952).

⁹ "Bicycling is like Church – many attend, but few understand." Jim Burlant.

¹⁰ "Nothing compares with the simple pleasure of a bike ride." John F. Kennedy.

¹¹ "The bicycle is a curious vehicle. Its passenger is its engine." John Howard.

¹² "Tot A's insight, Summer 1999: "Everybody is going where they have to go *or where they want to go*."

¹³ I stuff a big down comforter around my tots when the mercury drops. You can't even see them back there, the whole trailer is solid comforter. The only way you'd know they're back there is the fogged up plastic panels on the sides of the trailer.

Perhaps I am patterning behavior for my tots to follow; to be fit; to be conscious of environmental concerns; *to not be afraid to go a different way than everyone else they know*. Or -- equally possible -- I may be ingraining hatred of cycling. From my tots' perspective, do I seem odd? Do they see anything but a sweaty butt?

On the other hand, parents mindlessly torture their children by imprisoning them in the back seat on absurdly inappropriately long car trips, and most kids don't grow up with a hatred of cars. When my older son is in a car, and he sees a cyclist, he shouts, "Look! A Biker!" I read in his voice, at least for now, kinship and pride. We see the same bike commuters on our route each morning. "Hi." "Hey." A short wave. Brothers on wheels.

Some say it's too much cycling, it takes too much time,¹⁴ that I'm wearing myself down.¹⁵

Well, it hasn't killed me so far, so it's probably making me stronger. I have heard that in Ancient Greece, the way you trained for the bull lifting event was to get yourself a calf, and carry it on your shoulders every day. As the calf grows, you get stronger, so by the

¹⁴ Let's crunch the numbers. When I tote tots, it takes (on a very slow day) about 120 minutes each way, 240 minutes round trip. Sounds like a lot, but look at it this way; if someone were to spend 45 minutes each way on a daily commute by car, I'm sure you'd agree that's reasonable, right? So deduct 90 minutes from 240, since that would be time spent commuting by car anyway. That leaves us with 150 excess minutes. But certainly you'd agree that it's reasonable to get some exercise each day, wouldn't you? We could quibble over the number of minutes daily that's desirable to spend exercising -- but let's tentatively agree that 50 minutes a day is an acceptable amount. Now I just have 100 excess minutes to account for (and let's not consider the time one might spend driving over to the health club to get 50 minutes of exercise). OK, now let's discuss environmental concerns. Personally, I am not averse to helping the environment, but it's not the reason I get out of bed at 5 a.m. to bike commute; however, I can see where ozone-depletion due to the by-products of the combustion engine could potentially be a concern to future generations, so, it's worth a few minutes out of my day to help preserve the ozone. I'm personally willing to spend 10 minutes a day to save the earth. I'm at 90 minutes excess now. Let's talk about money. The average car costs \$5,700.00 a year to own and operate in the U.S. Spread that over, say 200 working days, and we get a rough average cost of \$25.00 a day to have a car to commute with. Certainly, each person's time is worth vastly different amounts, but most Americans, even fairly well-off Americans, would be willing to work an hour for \$25.00 tax-free. I am. So deduct 60 minutes from the 90 minutes remaining for my \$25.00 untaxed "wage", and I'm down to 30 excess minutes a day. But I'm still calculating. I consider cycling to have beneficial spiritual effects akin to prayer or meditation. I'm willing to spend 15 minutes a day tending my soul. So 15 wasted minutes remain. But it's also my hobby. I'm a busy guy, but even so, I can give 10 minutes a day to my hobby. So I'm left with 5 wasted, excess minutes. And I'm stuck. I can't account for these 5 minutes. If I were perfectly rational, I'd stop immediately, since I'm wasting 5 minutes a day. But while I continue to insist I am not insane, I am willing to concede that I am not entirely rational.

¹⁵ Longest weekend trip of the year; Albuquerque to Santa Fe, Hwy 14 on the way up, Hwy 41 on the way back, into and out of Albuquerque on Old Route 66, total mileage 189 miles over two days. No flats. Felt great. Back commuting on Monday.

time it's bull lifting time, you're ready. Similarly, my kids are getting heavier very slowly, it's scarcely perceptible. My children make me strong.

Some say it's unsafe.

I don't think that the route I travel is any less safe by bike than by car. Commuting with a kiddie trailer gives me much more respect from cars than I receive when I ride solo. Cars actually act respectfully toward cyclists when the bike has a kiddie trailer and is on the street. I never get buzzed. Cars slow down if necessary to pass safely. I bring the trailer with me even when I don't have my tots within! Virtually all drivers, even drivers who feel it might be satisfying to crunch a cyclist, simply cannot bring themselves to crush little kids. I am not unaware of risk. Hell, I represent very, very bad drivers for a living. But driving a car is not without significant risks too. The cage is not as protective as it seems.¹⁶

I love having my two cargo-tots. I get pleasure out of carrying *any kind* of cargo on a bike, but especially kids as cargo. I am moved and fascinated by pictures from "poor" countries, with cargo bikes piled high with stuff and people, pedaling forward.¹⁷ I'm currently in the market for a pedicab for all of our future travel, for when Tots A and B outgrow their kiddie trailer. We may come to be known as "The Flintstones".¹⁸ That is my dream.¹⁹

Richard Briones-Colman, The Extreme
Commuter

¹⁶ See www.kenkifer.com for more information on the risks of cycling and its relation to other activities. Contrary to public perception, driving a car is actually twice as likely to result in your death per hour of activity.

¹⁷ Interested? The best site is www.workbike.org.

¹⁸ "When I see an adult on a bicycle, I do not despair for the future of the human race." H.G. Wells.

¹⁹ Intrigued by the possibility of a carfree future? Check out www.carfree.com.