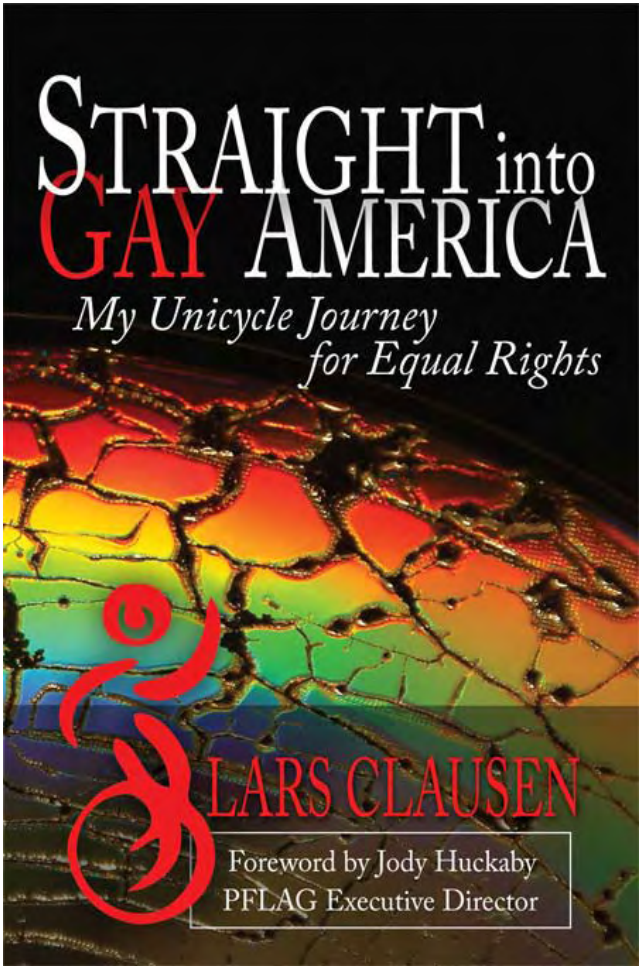

VISION

A world where lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are included in the privileges, the responsibilities, and the dignity offered equally to all people.

STRAIGHT INTO GAY AMERICA
is provided at no cost by author Lars Clausen. If you like it, pass it on.

For more information and to order paperback copies of Straight into Gay America, please visit www.straightintogayamerica.com.

BOOK AWARDS

Benjamin Franklin Award
Gold Medal

Book of the Year Award
Gold Medal

IPPY Awards
Bronze Medal

Straight Into Gay America

My Unicycle Journey for Equal Rights

by Lars Clausen

Soulscapers
CHELAN, WA

Praise for Straight into Gay America

"A story that must be told.
It's difficult to express how Straight into Gay America has provided me
with a renewed sense of my own purpose, and that of PFLAG."

Jody Huckaby: Executive Director, PFLAG
www.pflag.org

"Clausen is a soul-searcher. Straight into Gay America dares to
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"Lars Clausen shares Soulforce's commitment to ending Spiritual Violence
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our nation another step closer to the day of Equal Rights.."

Mel White, Founder, Soulforce: Author of Stranger at the Gate, and
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Also by Lars Clausen

One Wheel - Many Spokes: USA by Unicycle.

"...Clausen's unsinkable good nature and sunny outlook jumps out at readers
from practically every line of his book." ***Publishers Weekly***

"... Hitch a ride on this one wheel." ***ForeWord Magazine***

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My Unicycle Journey for Equal Rights
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Straight into Gay America: My Unicycle Journey for Equal Rights
by Lars Clausen.

To Anne

For all the love we share.

Contents

Part III SOUTH

Acknowledgments

"ALLIES LISTEN, and they believe what they hear," said Jake in Virginia.

Countless stories came my way as I unicycled five weeks and 1,000 miles Straight Into Gay America. Before the ride a gay college student in Minnesota advised me,

> Whatever you do, don't write
> another coming-out story. Gay literature
> is full of those stories. I want to hear what everyday
> life is like for other gay people.

The Plains, Virginia

I tried following this advice. But when my friend Jim Bodeen read my first draft, he asked me, "Where are *you* in this story?" He wanted my 1,000 mile road trip: He also wanted my own coming out experience.

"Where am I?" I thought to myself. "Still hiding under layers of good order and good intentions."

Jim caught me trying to be an equal rights advocate without truly probing the connections to my own life. Once he asked about my place in the story, I knew I needed to search for this answer. Thanks for the push.

A long string of people and events helped me grow toward valuing equal rights. Pedaling through all fifty states and publishing *One Wheel – Many Spokes* in 2004 gave me confidence for the physical part of unicycling Straight Into Gay America. Five weeks of riding introduced me to hundreds of new people. The major

characters appear in these pages. I've tried my best to represent our meetings well. When necessary, I have changed names. Mistakes and shortcomings of this story are all my own.

Jennifer Ting and Tan Vo honored my ride with their video camera and their own questions. They took months from their lives to produce a documentary of this ride. Jen filmed the New York City Pride Parade, walking miles through the 95-degree heat. Tan had her video inspected by a White House guard after filming a security gate. They saw a lot.

Editors, printers, designers, typesetters. Thanks for helping to make this book real — Jim Bodeen and Blue Begonia Press *www.bluebegoniapress.com*, Anne Clausen, Karl Clausen, Cynthia Gustavson, Anne Jackets, Dane Johnson, George Harper, Paul Palumbo, Chris Savage, Jennifer Ting, Emily Van Kley. Special thanks to Kent Gustavson and Blooming Twig Books *www.bloomingtwigbooks.com* for their passionate care of *Straight Into Gay America* and producing the cover and the interior for the print and e-book versions. Thanks for the financial support that helped me take this tour, especially to Randi and Phil Reitan, who gave their gift in honor of Mel White and Gary Nixon of Soulforce. Thanks also to Ken Peterson, and to George and Bridget Winters.

Family. Thanks to my dad who teaches me to think as deeply as I can. You'll discover in this story that we've come out on different sides of the LGBT Equal Rights movement. Probing these differences became part of discovering where I am in this story. This hasn't been easy. My brother tells me, "I've always known that dad's love and mom's love for me is unconditional. It's always been there for me and that's more important than anything else." I feel the same way, thankful to know that underneath the differences is our love.

This is my third long-distance unicycle tour, the first one riding solo. On the first two tours, my wife Anne brought our kids KariAnna and Kai along, providing my road support. For this Straight into Gay America tour, Anne and the kids stayed home. Kai turned nine while I was on the ride. KariAnna was eleven. On this tour I missed important days in their lives, including Anne's and my 15th anniversary. I hope this ride proves worthwhile for many, but I hope especially that it can serve my family.

Sometime in the next dozen years, we'll probably learn if our children are attracted to those of the same sex or the opposite, or if they will understand their gender identity differently from their biological sex. I want the five weeks of this journey to assure them how much we desire to love them for who they are, no matter what margin or center they find to root their lives.

Foreword

THE BOOK you hold in your hand right now is nothing short of a sacred journey.

When Lars Clausen walked into my Washington DC office, dressed in road-worn yellow riding gear and pushing a three-foot wheel, I got a quick lesson in looking beyond first impressions. Instead of the circus act I might have expected, I was treated to the final day of his 1,000-mile tour and many of the stories that you'll read here in *Straight Into Gay America*. I shared in the questions of a straight man who longs for queer justice: Why does society judge so much against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people, and why do we listen so little to the everyday LGBT stories of love, care, and commitment?

As the National Executive Director of PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) I represent people who long for justice and equality for their LGBT loved ones. As a brother with three gay siblings, I know what many families experience in their own coming out journey. As a gay man, I know what being different feels like and how it feels to be ostracized simply for being who you are, particularly by religious institutions and the leaders they anoint.

Lars Clausen's life is different from mine. He is an ordained pastor. He is married with two children. He has no known LGBT family members. And yet, he found himself on the road for five weeks, exposed and vulnerable to every passing car and person.

He carried a single question to as many people as he could, "What do you think of gay rights in this country today?"

Why would a straight man do this?

This book is gritty in its honesty and includes intimate details of Lars' life. He shares the experiences that led him to probe what it means to be different. We see his efforts to engage others in a dialogue for acceptance. As his travels unfold you will meet the many people along the way who helped create this story.

Straight into Gay America is a partner for our personal journeys. Lars' vulnerability and his self-exploration draw us deeply into our own questions and convictions.

This book is also a partner for the journey toward LGBT equal rights. Our history is a slow and uncertain path toward freedom, peace, and justice. Yet, no matter how many turns the road takes before we arrive, I know we will see the day of LGBT equal rights.

From my view as the leader of PFLAG, I am constantly astounded at the skills and compassion that I experience from so many people. Moms and dads, family members and friends, each with his or her own "coming out" story as they have grown to cope with, accept and finally celebrate their LGBT loved ones. Each of these people has a story to share, and I feel privileged to be privy to many of them.

Activist and teacher Parker J. Palmer speaks of our lives having purpose, of each of us having a calling that must be discovered deep within our being, if only we take the time to stop and listen. When we live our life from the purpose for which we are born, we take an active role in creating the world around us. In his book, *Let Your Life Speak,* Palmer says "our complicity in world making is a source of awesome and sometimes painful responsibility—and a source of profound hope for change. It is the ground of our common call to leadership, the truth that makes leaders of us all."

Lars Clausen reveals the painful and the awesome throughout his stories. Just as it took many people of all races to step up and join the fight for civil rights in the 1960's, we know it is going to take far more than just LGBT people to achieve true equality. We are on the brink of LGBT equality in this country, and we need more people like Lars to help make equality a reality for everyone.

Straight Into Gay America is a light for the journey ahead and a bridge across the divide between straight and gay. If you are LGBT, I hope this book motivates you to come out, to be all that you are, and to live in celebration of your unique and genuine self. If you are straight, I hope this book inspires you to join the fight for full equality for everyone in this country.

Jody Michael Huckaby
Executive Director of PFLAG
www.pflag.org

Introduction

DURING 5 weeks and 1,000 miles of unicycling for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equal rights:

> No one cited Biblical injunctions against me unicycling on the road.
>
> No one studied the constitution to see what to do with my one wheel preference.
>
> No one said to me. "We have our place. You have your place."
>
> No one forced me to ride in a closet.

What if we celebrated LGBT difference as easily as the difference between bicycling and unicycling, as a gift to be thankful for among all the standard wheel arrangements?

I rode my unicycle to collect everyday stories, to show that queer people live normal lives, that there's nothing to be afraid of from gay people, that the friendships I've developed through the years can be found everywhere, and that the church's damnation of gay people is all wrong. I rode as a pastor to argue a point.

With the ride done, I race toward another deadline. Rhetoric will soon ramp up for the 2006 midterm elections. Political and religious conversations about homosexuality promise to turn red hot again and polarize our country. People's lives will turn into political capital. I have watched this happen before and this time I am ready.

This time I have stories, because on this tour I asked the following questions:

"What is it like to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) in America today?"

"What do you think of gay rights?"

Now I speed through composing my rough draft, writing faster than I unicycled my 1,000 miles Straight Into Gay America. I want to do what I can as a progressive pastor on a one-wheeled cycle to make the case for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender equal rights.

Printing out the first draft of my manuscript, I ask my poet-friend Jim Bodeen if he'll take a look. He has loved the idea of this ride ever since first hearing of it. He told me once that if a person will only tell their story, he can "cut them a lot of slack." Story is his life, so much that he has a Poetry Pole in his front-yard garden, complete with thumbtacks for posting writing. Anyone can tack up words; Jim will tend them. He and colleagues have just published *Weathered Pages*, hundreds of poems selected from the ten-year history of the pole.

I take my freshly printed pages and start the three-hour drive over to Jim's home in Yakima, Washington. Driving alone and anticipating this meeting, I think back to other elders who have guided me through stages of my life: Carl, Russell, Don, Steve, Bill, John, Robert, Glen, Darrell, Jim, Paul. Maybe I sought them out. Maybe they found me. Perhaps I've just been lucky. Mentors have shaped me.

The Poetry Pole – By Anne Clausen.

"Hey, Jim!" I shout when I arrive at his house. He's waiting on his porch as I walk up the driveway. I pass the Poetry Pole before we walk into his home. Jim retired one year ago. That's the same time he got the crewcut, which makes him look like a Marine. He cut his hair to mark the crossing from teaching high school students to following storypath fulltime. So far the path has led him to extended trips in El Salvador and Mexico. He spends a lot of time with his mother, too, exploring family history. When he's not lost in words, he swims to keep strong for this journey.

Jim and I sit on the tan leather couch in his living room. His penetrating eyes and ears define him. They are always search-

ing for more. Whether from the center of society or from the edge, he weaves stories into fabric strong enough to test the contradictions of life. We haven't wasted any time. He begins turning pages, saying little as he reads. After awhile he stops and raises his head to speak.

"There's something missing here. I want you to go and watch '*Walk The Line.*' Pay attention to Cash's first audition."

The new biography of Johnny Cash is playing in theaters. Two days later I buy my ticket and take my seat during an afternoon matinee. I watch the recording agent cut Cash off in the middle of a Jimmy Davis gospel hymn.

If you was hit by a truck
and you was lying out in that gutter
dying, and you had time to sing one song,
one song people would remember

before you're dirt, one song
that would let God know
what you felt about your time
here on earth, one song that would sum

you up, you telling me that's the song
you'd sing? … Or would you sing
something different, something real,
something you felt? Cause I'm telling you right now,

that's the kind of songs people want to hear.
That's the kind of songs that truly saves people.
It ain't got nothing to do with believing in God.
It has to do with believing in yourself.

Cash's next try is a song about Folsom Prison.

I walk from the theater to the coffee shop, replaying in my mind the two hours of death and resurrection I've just seen; watching Cash lie drunk in the dirt as often as he sang on the stage. Jim sent me here to show me a message: My story isn't real enough, and it doesn't share what I feel.

What do I feel? Unsettled. Scared. Angry. Hopeful. Uncertain. Folsom Prison makes me think of my church. Two months after riding Straight Into Gay America I'm not attending worship anymore.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America I belong to just finished spending five years and more than a million dollars studying whether to sanction the blessing of same-sex unions and whether to allow the ordination of partnered gay and lesbian pastors. They voted both proposals down.

When Cash decided to play the Folsom Prison concert, he asked his managers to arrange the concert. They refused. "Your fans are Christian people. They don't want to hear you singing to a bunch of murderers and rapists."

Cash answers them back, "Then they're not Christian."

I was raised in the Lutheran Church. I'm an ordained pastor in this church. I've served congregations in Alaska and Michigan, but I can't make myself sit through worship anymore. Exclusionary rules contradict the gospel of Jesus and make me too angry. Anne doesn't pressure me, but we feel the tension on Sunday mornings as she walks out the door with our kids in tow.

I feel like Johnny Cash; I'd rather be at Folsom Prison. At the concert with the inmates, he tells them they're the best audience he's ever had. They are his resurrection crowd; they've got nothing left to lose; they understand his suffering and hope. I felt the same way about my thousand miles of riding out beyond the status quo. Jim pressures me. "Why did you feel that way?"

A year ago our family lived in a small Lutheran retreat center where gay rights were the dominant issue of the winter community. The new directors of the village were appointed at the same time a new pastor was being selected. Of the three candidates, the village was overwhelming in its preference for one of these three, a man who happened to be gay. The directors chose differently from this pastor who so impressed the village. I wrote the new directors a letter of concern.

"You are astonishingly arrogant," was the first line of their reply, and it went downhill from there, closing with a quote from a favorite teacher, "the guilty cannot love."

And then there was my last call as a pastor, serving the campus of Michigan State University. The national board reviewed me in the spring of 2000, after my four years of ministry there—they called me a "Lone Ranger." They even said "It is time for Lars to go." I've been out searching ever since.

"Get closer," says Jim. "Push your own story." He wants me to be more than a good reporter. He's hunting for what's inside of me. He doesn't care about those letters calling me arrogant,

or those reviews saying I have to go. He cares about my life, not my good name.

"You want to be good?" he pushes. "You want to be safe? Safe is not part of death and resurrection."

People call Jim a Poetry Man, and right now this title scares me. My church. My life. All my questions. Mentors have made it impossible for me to live in the closet of the status quo, but I still feel threatened when someone starts digging into my life. After watching Cash audition, I know I have an invitation to write the story I'd give when I'm lying in the road, hit by a truck, dying like roadkill.

I push my whole manuscript to the side and worry, if I pick it up again, will it ever look the same? I'm scared. Poetry Man has gotten through to me.

I pack up my computer and head over to his house again. This conversation will have nothing to do with grammar.

"Come in." Jim opens the door when I knock and grabs my hand to pull me in. He pushes his face up close to mine, intense, penetrating, stripping away physical space the same way he bores for truth when he reads. I give him my story. I tell him what I saw at the movie.

"You got it. Look. You write
about all the injustices you came across
on your ride, and the people you met,
and the changes you want,

but change is dangerous.
Good people don't change,
only the desperate." He takes
a breath, "Where's your desperation?"

Hunting through a pile of letters, I find the one I'm searching for. I take a long look, then start reading, words from a woman who was once a man, who gave me her death and resurrection story about trying on her own to do the sex change operation that would allow him to become female, how he tried this three times, and ended up in the emergency room after each encounter with the knife, doctors screaming at the woman who kept trying to come into existence, until finally she prevailed at changing her sex.

Poetry Man sits for a long time.
"My God," he says, and sits a long time more.
"That's a coming out story." He turns to me.
"Now where is yours?"

"Scared me a lot," I tell Paul, filling him in on the Johnny Cash movie and the challenge from Poetry Man. We're sipping coffee together at the Vogue Lounge. Paul is another current mentor, the Pastor of the Lutheran Church in Chelan that Anne and KariAnna and Kai attend on Sundays without me. His daughter and my kids play together. Instead of the unicycling I do for exercise, he gets up at 5:00 a.m. for basketball with friends. He's lean with a narrow face. He laughs easily and often, but I imagine him playing an intense game of ball.

Paul pastors edge ministries. Every Friday afternoon he stands on a corner in town with a handmade sign that reads PEACE VIGIL. He's been leading this vigil since before the war started in Iraq.

When I tell him about Johnny Cash and Folsom prison, Paul says to me, "I hardly ever meet anyone who loves the church anymore," he replies. "Liberals don't. Conservatives don't. What has happened?"

"I don't want to talk about church anymore." I reply . "I hardly even want to talk about Jesus anymore. Say 'church,' say 'Jesus' and you have a month of explaining to describe what you mean by those words. At the end, if you're all still talking, it's a miracle."

I've found conflict or been removed from every Lutheran place I've tried since ordination. Paul pushes on this nerve. I have no pretty endings in church. All those years in seminary. All those years in parishes. I thought if I got out on the road, away from the pulpit, I could just hear unburdened stories. But almost everyone who talks about LGBT talks about church—rarely as a place of love, more often as a place of death. If love comes in church, it comes in through cracks. If the church is my judge, I'm a failure.

I walk home while my story churns inside me. What scares me is Poetry Man's warning that poetry allows no lies and no deception.

I don't know if I dare explore my life this deeply. I don't want the danger of ending up even further outside the status quo. I wanted to go out on behalf of outsiders, not become one myself. I know the perils of the margins once the standard interpretations quit making sense. Jesus lasted three years. Sweet Jesus. Three years. This is the church that Paul wants me to love, but the truth is, I have not found peace after all the lonely crazy places I've seen.

"All true," concedes Poetry Man, "but you didn't ride just to argue a point about equal rights." He looks at feeble lines I've written about my time as a pastor. "There's a whole book in why you traded your robes for a unicycle. And you don't have a word of it written."

"That's not the book I'm writing." I say the words loud, as if force will give them credence.

Poetry Man confronts me now.
"You didn't leave the church to argue
a point. You left when you were
desperate. You didn't ride

your tour just to do a good deed.
What about not believing in God
anymore? You've talked to me
about this. Where's that in this writing?"

"That's not the book I'm writing." I repeat the words, this time without strength, "I wanted to be a reporter, share what I saw, help gay rights."

You watch Public Television instead of FOX news
and everyone knows the reporters have a viewpoint.
You have one, too. You choose
what you watch.

You're a pastor.
You don't believe in God,
and you're not going to report that?
Who. What. When. Why. Where. And how.

All reporting comes through the story of your own life.
You're scared. You think you're doing
something big. Right now it's small.
It's a cover-up of you.

Your ride could still save you.

Poetry Man picks up the 74,000 words of my manuscript draft, and places them back in my lap. He makes no sound. I look at the pile of pages, knowing I have to go back through each line. Is there anything in here worthy of a truck-crash dying hour? For a long time we sit on Jim's couch, the pages resting on my knees. At last I look up at this Poetry Man, searching his face.

He tells me, "You don't have to do this, you know."

Another few minutes pass before I finally speak. "All last summer when I rode, I kept meeting people who faced the choice of living their life or living in a closet. Maybe while I toured for equal rights I was touring to find my own voice, and unlock my own closet."

Poetry Man answers, this time more gently. "Let's see your story."

Sraight into gay america

Part I

North

Chapter One

Into the Margin

A GAY UNICYCLIST might understand
more quickly than me how the danger
of Virginia roads resembles gay America,
how lack of safe space threatens life.

Three weeks into this journey I begin unicycling in Maryland, in safety. Pedaling on One Wheel, alongside the 5:30 a.m. commute near Frederick, I barely notice the traffic speeding past at 70 miles-per-hour. Some good transportation planner built this Maryland highway with its grassy median and with shoulders big enough to park truck convoys. On this stretch my mind wanders freely, anticipating the final two weeks of unicycling Straight Into Gay America.

Everything changes as I cross the Potomac River to Virginia. All the four-lane traffic converges upon an old bridge with no shoulder. Compression brakes of a big-rig roar behind me, the driver jamming down to my one-wheel speed. The trucker has no choice. Against opposing traffic she has no room to pass. I glance for the briefest second at the Potomac that I pedal above.

Otherwise, cycling at top speed to cross the bridge, I eye the grille of the giant Freightliner filling my rear-view mirror.

Winding the first few curves into Virginia, the dozen inches of shoulder turn into four inches and then two. Every single car must consciously consent to pass me, calculate survival space before swinging around. Trucks pound their brakes and time their passes with opposing traffic. Long trailers press into me as I balance on One Wheel.

One cell phone distraction, one ill-timed look
in the mirror to finish morning make-up,
one Starbucks spilled in a lap— I die.
Heartbeat rocketing,

I make ten minutes in Virginia
then dive off the road and give up
unicycling, too little space even to hitchhike
out of this danger, 711 miles of unicycling Straight

Into Gay America. I become nothing, tensed to bursting,
quivering in the weeds and stickers at the side of the road.
All my privileges of white skin, male features, economic power, do nothing for me here. The center of the road

which I typically command, has become a killing field.
Panic. Frustration. Anger. I turn to walk back, pushing
One Wheel through gravel and grass,
to a solitary EZ-Gas station half-a-mile back.

Not until I buy coffee from the EZ-Gas
and return outdoors, pacing on the asphalt
parking lot, heart still pumping madly,
tension dominating my body,

watching traffic pouring by,
do I begin to see connections,
to see how being gay in America
is like the lack of safe space

on the shoulder of this road,
how gay people must make decisions
with every person they meet,
calculating whether to trust

that others will honor their life
as transgender, lesbian, bisexual, or gay.
"Will you give me space on this road?
or will you kill me with your bumper?"

Every legal right of cyclists matters
not a bit when riders have no space
to put their cycles, their bicycles, their unicycles,
their identities—when no room exists for difference.

For the first three weeks of my tour, the margin of the road has provided me with safety. This morning my ride reaches the line between life and death. Equal rights have become survival rights. I want to make it through these next two weeks of riding. I want to return safely to my family. The parting at the start of this ride had been so painful.

Son Kai grumps his way along the gravel road, this ten-mile bike ride from our family's home at Holden Village in Washington State, to the ferry dock at Lucerne. "I really don't want to do this," he says, nearing the ferry that will shuttle me downlake away from our remote community to the land of automobiles, airplanes, cell phones and a unicycle tour. At the boat Kai follows suit with KariAnna, tears rolling as I pack my gear onto the ferry, beginning my five-week journey, Straight Into Gay America.

Holden, Washington. Holden Village departure.

Anne hugs the kids into herself, their mother hen. I watch from the ferry railing, impotent, voice gone, crying at what I am doing to her. Again. Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests. I am flying the coop once more. How much I take for granted, my own blue pillow, the eight kisses for Kai each night, to mark his years, and the eleven for KariAnna. Of falling asleep with Anne after the pattern of another day, two bodies as one, two souls resting into each other.

Holden, Washington. Kai, KariAnna, and Anne.

"What's that part about flying the coop?" Poetry Man breaks in, beginning to work through my manuscript.

"I wore Anne out when I toured through the fifty states. She took care of the kids and finding campgrounds and calling the churches where I was speaking. She drove the old motor home with the broken air conditioner through the South, suffered through every mechanical breakdown. When we finished the trip, she wrapped up the keys to the motor home and gave them to me, saying she'd never drive it again. When *One Wheel – Many Spokes* came out, I wanted to unicycle my book tour along the West Coast, from Canada to Mexico. I planned to do it alone if I had to, or see if my Dad would drive for me. Anne ended up coming along with the kids. We tented that trip; she drove our car. It was shorter, simpler, but I still wore her out."

"Were you scared about your marriage when you started this trip?"

"We've got a lot of LGBT friends who've been hurt by the church, and we both believe in equal…"

"Were you scared?"

"What I'm scared about is sitting here talking to you, turning this manuscript into a book about myself instead of about LGBT life in America today. Yeah, I was scared about being away from Anne for five weeks. I knew she'd be safe in the community we lived in and have good company. But the last time we were apart was the three months she was teaching in

Alaska and I was back in Berkeley, finishing seminary. In those three months Anne's father died, we miscarried our first baby, and the Mt. Spur Volcano erupted; all while I was gone."

"That's what Anne was thinking about the whole time back at Holden while you were riding?"

Suddenly I'm remembering our honeymoon, six months of bicycling through Europe, from Stockholm, Sweden, to the Rock of Gibraltar, and how when we tell the story to friends Anne tells of the night in Spain, four months into the trip, when I said to her, "We could just keep riding. In three years we could get all the way around the world." Anne tells friends how she went to sleep crying in our flashlight tent that night. "I wasn't crying for myself. I was crying for Lars, for what I was doing to his dreams. Four months was a good trip. Six months was okay. But not three years."

I tell this to Poetry Man.

"You think that's not part of your ride this summer?"

"Yeah, that's part of the ride."

Poetry Man puts his glasses back on and returns to the manuscript.

On the plane tonight, heading toward Vermont to begin the tour, I will sleep upright, six miles above earth's surface, putting thousands of miles between KariAnna's wet tears and my own, between Anne's body and mine. Our hearts will ache with pain, stretching to bridge this distance.

At the Sea-Tac airport, Jennifer Ting meets me for just the second time. Five feet tall. Asian features. The purposeful walk I've already come to recognize. A week ago she and her videographer, Tan Vo, were visiting us at Holden Village. After a spring announcement about my tour in *The Advocate*, (the nation's largest LGBT magazine), Jennifer had called up her videographer, Tan Vo, to announce she'd found their next documentary project.

"Yeah, right," Tan had replied when she heard Jen's idea. "Gay rights? A unicycle? You're sure about this?"

Jen went ahead and wrote me an eight-page proposal describing why she wanted to follow my ride. She noted her discouragement with the 2004 elections: Eleven states passed anti-gay marriage amendments. She mentioned her disillusion with relig-

ion, including her Catholic background. "I thought Jesus was about including everybody," she wrote, "not judging others."

Along with her proposal Jen mailed the DVD of "*Not Straightforward*," her and Tan's first documentary. Tan starred in this film; ten Seattle dates to explore lesbian relationships. Watching the mixture of humor and insight, I had a feeling I'd be in good hands with these two. Their interest goes far beyond capturing the best camera angle. Gay America is their life.

Jen gets right to work. "What does this feel like? You've been preparing for this ride for two years?"

Tonight my heart is still back at Holden with my family. I don't know yet what this ride feels like. Right now I'm taking it step by step, checking my unicycle in at the counter, walking through security, finding the gate where I'll step onto the plane. As Jen films my image reflecting off the airport window, the ride begins to feel real. Watching Jen work, I realize how we will observe the same tour, but we will author different stories, each of us interpreting as best we can.

Here at the airport, Jen films me walking onto the boarding ramp, taking the next step toward returning to the road with One Wheel. She will catch up with me tomorrow in Burlington. Finding my seat, I settle in for this overnight journey. While we wait for takeoff I begin my first conversation of the trip. The proud aunt sitting next to me tells energetically of her nephew's college graduation. She listens with interest as I tell her I'm starting a unicycle tour, but mentioning Straight Into Gay America disconnects us.

"Do you know any gay or lesbian people?" I ask.

From Charleston, South Carolina, she answers: "Only by suspicion."

"So there's not much conversation?"

"No."

She seems to pull away but her considerable
size defies the effort to disconnect her thick black leg
from the side of my freckled white one, all through
the long hours of this overnight flight.

Looking down at our parallel legs
I see Straight Into Gay America in clear
perspective. Individual seats are a deception.
Isolation is an illusion.

Sun shines on the New Jersey tarmac through cloudless 6:00 a.m. sky. The TV monitor announces a coming high of 95 degrees. I change planes here to get to Burlington, Vermont.

Not only am I leaving Anne and the kids for five weeks, I also don't know what route I will ride or where I will stay on this trip. I have an eight-pound backpack that holds all my gear. Other than this first night I have planned in Burlington, I hope to journey day by day, staying each night at the invitation of someone along the way, creating my route according to the stories I follow, propelled by hospitality from one place to the next. The night on the plane felt long and lonely, separating from my family, transitioning into this wandering existence.

The pilot announces our arrival. "We've got 72 degrees in Burlington, scattered clouds, a chance of rain." The landscape outside is a rich green of hardwood forest. Inside the airport, I notice an immediate difference from New Jersey; almost everyone here has white skin. Then I see one Asian woman, then an Asian couple. After a while an African-American woman walks past the baggage carousel; none of Newark's rich racial mixture. The things I seek on this trip are less apparent than the color of skin.

Baggage arrives. At a seat near the baggage carousel I unpack two boxes of unicycle parts, arranging pieces like an altar around me for the beginning of my tour. Seat post, wheel, water bottles, knee and elbow pads—I savor One Wheel in its parts. I stop to write. I stop right now so I will remember to stop all during this journey. Jen asked me if I prayed the night before my ride. This is prayer. This is a great thanksgiving, and now lifting the elements, assembling the parts, I pray for five weeks of holy communing. I pray for safety; I want to show doubters that travelers can still find grace on the shoulder of the road.

While I screw in pedals, Dayton and Sarah walk up and offer a first story. Born, raised, retired in Vermont, they tell of a Governor

Hoff, from the 1960's, the first Democrat elected after 49 Republicans in a row, "that would be the beginning of movement toward civil unions."

Then middle-aged Matt stands next to me, washing large hands in the restroom. "Follow your conscience," he advises. "Personally, though, I'm Roman Catholic; that sums up my position." He holds up one finger like a bolt. Circling the fingers of his other hand like a nut, he jabs the bolt through it again and again. "That says it all. That's normal."

"Good luck on your ride," he adds. "I'll look for your book when it comes out."

The woman at the information desk tells me where I can leave my packing boxes. I call my mom to tell her I've safely landed. Mom has always been my safe place. Although she worries about me providing a living for my family, she has always encouraged my path. She doesn't need to know where it is leading. When friends ask her what I'm up to next, she answers, "We'll have to wait and see."

Rain drips down on me as I pedal the three miles into the center of Burlington. I barely notice this weather. Cars honk greetings. Drivers wave. Pedestrians turn to stare. Bicyclists hurry to catch up and ask about my unicycle. I am back on the road, riding again at ten miles an hour on my 36-inch wheel. Handlebars rise up from behind me, and I grip them as old friends; the half-year of memories from unicycling the fifty states start rushing back.

Three years ago I pedaled coast to coast and back again. During 9,136 miles, I set two long distance Guinness World records. More than the miles or the records, I sought out Native American lands and people wherever I could. American bombs were falling on Afghanistan when I began my tour; we were ramping up for Iraq before I finished. Watching the news I saw only fear, violence, and retribution. On the unicycle I heard different stories, like the 90-year old man who was out for his daily bicycle ride near Sundance, Wyoming. "Keeps the belly fat off." He'd come out west from Pennsylvania, on a motorcycle, seventy years earlier. He'd seen wars.

The deeper I rode into our land, the more people sought me out, the guy on the unicycle. They'd pull off the highway and wait

for me to catch up. "Where are you going? What are you doing?" For half a year I dove into the daily life of this country. Having served as pastor with Native Inupiat Eskimo people in Nome, I buried suicides and officiated other tragic deaths. Pedaling across the country I put these horrors into the bigger story of genocide and the American destruction of Native life. After a Nez Perce man in Washington State blessed my ride, he told me to pray when I reached the East Coast. I prayed questions.

How can a nation of such hospitality be so violent?
How can a nation of such violence be so hospitable?

Riding on the road feels more like church than sitting in a pew. The physical meditation of pedaling thousands of revolutions each day helps keep me going even as the ride exposes dark sides of life. This ride too will have genocide in its background. Homosexual people wore pink triangles on their way to the death camps in Nazi Germany. Some fanatics quote the Bible today, saying homosexuals should be stoned to death. The 1998 Wyoming fencepost crucifixion of Matthew Shepherd remains fresh in people's minds. New hate crimes make news, then fade away. Friends worry for my safety. "Watch out for the crazies," they say.

Now, unicycle assembled, beginning this ride into the complications of our country, I enter this dialogue with a single question. What is everyday life like in LGBT America?

My departure anxiety fades to the background. Worrying about Anne and the kids ceases. I feel the thrill of finally starting this ride; no doubts, no jitters, no worries as I take the first pedal strokes. I have only the trail of this story for my route. Other than an e-mail with an offer to stay in Manhattan, my only known destination is this first night with Dave. I hope to see Washington DC. I hope to worship at Jerry Falwell's church. All I know is wherever the story leads, if all goes well, my flight home to family will depart from Baltimore on the afternoon of July 19th.

Riding these first moments out of Burlington Airport, I turn One Wheel into the adventure of the road, into this big wide summertime country. Dave speaks directions into my cell phone. I get them mangled on the way into downtown. Ending up on

Church Street, four young people, sitting on their possessions, tell me my unicycle is the coolest thing they've ever seen. One has a half-inch plug through the center of his nose. They are dressed in khaki clothes, darkened by weeks of unwashed grease, "We live on trains," they say. I tell them my own ride is headed to Baltimore. They're interested until I ask their thoughts about my riding Straight Into Gay America; then they close off conversation and resume their separation from the crowd.

I'd stand here longer to see if we could start conversation, but a young man comes striding up, "Is that a Coker?" he points at my unicycle.

"You know these?"

"Sure, I unicycle. My girlfriend and I just had a baby, though, so no time for pedaling. I'm still a member of the Vermont Unicycling Club." Ashley talks about riding, club, and new family, as he walks me to the porch of Dave's apartment.

Dave at the door is the same as I remember, some inches shorter than my 6'1", still lots of curly dark hair. Seven years ago we met at Holden Village. I led a retreat and Dave quizzed me hard when I claimed all theology, all thinking about God, begins with the old bumper sticker, Shit Happens. "Most of us didn't start wondering about God because everything was going fine," I told the participants. "The challenges are what make us wrestle with God and struggle to make sense of our lives."

Dave's story fit, but he'd never heard God talked about that way. The death of his Dad. The death of his brother. Ostracism for being gay. Strained relations with his mom.

We kept intermittent contact while Dave lived in Fargo, North Dakota. When I decided to start my ride in Vermont, Dave e-mailed, "Guess what, I just moved to Burlington; can you stay with me when you come through?

Now, in his apartment, he tells me. "This is the first place I've felt at home. I can walk down the street, and I can talk openly with people here. When someone hears I'm gay, it's fine; it doesn't end our conversation."

Fargo felt different: "When people discovered I was gay, they snickered, said something snide, and couldn't treat me the same."

Growing up in Iowa felt different: "In 8th grade I told a boy in school I liked him. He told the others, and school turned into torment. Heck, I didn't even know what the word gay meant. I just knew I liked that boy and wanted to be friends."

Family felt different: "Being gay means I'm a disappointment and an embarrassment to my mom. I remember when I told her about being gay, and having the most wonderful news, 'Mom, I have a boyfriend!' She lost the son she wished I was. I'm in my forties now. This is a lot of years to live this way."

"Why did you write these things down?" asks Poetry Man. "Why so short?"

"Because I've got a lot of people ahead of me on this ride. I'm not trying to write an encyclopedia." I look again at Dave's summaries: The words 'Embarrassment to my mom' jump off the page and bite me. Just as Dave was an embarrassment to his mom, riding Straight Into Gay America seems to embarrass my dad. I tell Poetry Man the connection.

"Remember how we met?" he asks.

"Yeah, one week after I announced I was going to do this ride. You were visiting Holden Village, leading a poetry workshop."

"You had a letter in your pocket that very night."

"From my Dad. He'd written right away to express concern about my plan to unicycle Straight Into Gay America."

"That's what I remember. And I remember the poem you wrote at that workshop. Do you still have it?"

Poetry Man keeps working through my manuscript while I pull a pile of other pages from my shoulder bag. When I find the poem that I wrote back then at Holden I hand it over to him. He takes the pages and then begins to read the poem out loud to me, starting with the quote I included from my dad,

With that in mind
I would suggest to you
that you should try to find
a way to stay in the mainstream.
And the unicycle ride
STRAIGHT INTO GAY AMERICA
is not moving toward the mainstream.
FROM DAD

Poetry Man continues with the letter poem I composed as my response. He reads slowly, driving the words more deeply into me.

I came to the poetry workshop last night
with nothing in writing except the mail in my back
pocket, the letter you'd written, Dad. I thought to read
a paragraph out loud, but it didn't seem the place.

Then, at the end of class, in the way serendipity intrudes,
the class assignment came—write a letter poem. I walked
back to Chalet Three, and here I sit, your thoughts pulled
from my pocket, trying to gather my own for you.

How old was I then, anyway? Eighteen? Twenty?
The time we took that cross-country shortcut to finish
our weeklong trek in the Sierras? Remember
that white-granite crevasse we started up,

which got so steep we couldn't turn around to come back
down? How we ended up taking off our backpacks, handing
them up from ledge to ledge, and joining tandem hands
to push and haul each other up impossible steepness

until at last we came out on top, in bright high-altitude blue
sky that felt closer and more wondrous than
before the challenge of that chute? Remember in the
afternoon, at the trailhead, after the hike was finished?

And Don's old Toyota pickup
we'd promised to spot for him to retrieve
at the end of his own hike? How it wouldn't start
and wouldn't start, even for you the master

and me the aspiring mechanic?
And how, when more than an hour later we gave
up, and sat in our car eating crackers and drinking
from our water bottles, I had told you to go

and start the truck? And you'd said no,
and I'd insisted, and you'd gone over to crank

the starter one last time, and that little green pickup
turned right over and started running smooth?

And I followed you in our red Pinto, and we spotted
his car, and we drove home through Yosemite Valley.
And how a week later when you talked to Don,
he told how he'd needed a tow for the truck,

from the trailhead to the auto shop in Bishop, and the mechanic there had voiced amazement over how it ever reached the trail junction, "These points are completely burned out. Your engine should never have started."

I grew up with no doubt of your love
for me, of your hand being there to haul me up
when I am in need, and hoping mine can always be there
for you, no matter the size of the mysteries or the miracles.

Strange then, how we two lovers of philosophy
seem to grow increasingly farther apart. The very places
that you admired me learning from, the Air Force
Academy, Cal Berkeley and seminary,

all helped me see the holes in the center,
and the hope in the edge. The Christianity
I studied revealed a conflicted core, even while Jesus
the person became a stronger partner for my pathways.

It's not new, your pushing me to the mainstream.
You would have preferred something other than my bicycling across the USA in 1987. Same with my first job,
first unicycle tour. Still, at the end of all journeys,

you offered your congratulations.
Now as I announce my next hope, to unicycle
Straight Into Gay America, you let me know
once more I'm moving against your sentiments,

"There must be a way to work
for a better future without listening to the shrill
voices and the 'Chicken Little, the Sky is Falling.'"
Know I feel both gift and question in your pushing.

Few others cause me such careful reflection; my own voice
is always stronger because of yours. I wonder,
though, from the center of this conversation,
what you would want for me if I were gay.

Would you want me not to be a pastor?
Would you want me not to have your grandchildren?
Will you treat those grandchildren differently
if they grow up gay or lesbian,

or even wonder if I'd helped to cause their homosexuality
by my own efforts at inclusion? Perhaps we're back
in that Sierra chute again, no turning back,
passing gear above our heads to one another,

handing ourselves into each other, not knowing
where the crest is, or where the easy hiking will resume.
At the end of this trail, will we find
another green pickup?

Poetry Man asks if I remember what he told me that weekend.

"You said poetry is dangerous. In a poem there's no place to hide."

"That's right."

"And you told us at the start of each session, 'We're all in this together. We're all just trying to figure life out.'"

"That's right."

"And you told me to mail that poem to my Dad. You told me he'd cry when he read it."

I remind Poetry Man that my Dad did not cry when he read it. "He wrote me another warning about not getting too far outside the mainstream."

"Yeah," says Poetry Man, "but I cried."

1962: Dad holding me on his unicycle.

Chapter Two

Common Humanity

A SCREAMING OUTBURST ends the first dinner of my trip. Dave has driven me across town to this gathering of eight people. Some are friends of friends, some have heard of my ride from the Internet. All are allies of LGBT rights. Conversation moves quickly as we sit on the porch, talking our way through dinner and homemade apple pie.

Perhaps the extra glass of wine, perhaps the issues themselves, charge the explosion that follows the meal. As the conversation turns to political policy, we find ourselves aligning seven against one on our ideas of war, economy, jobs, and health, a Democrat versus Republican discussion in this liberal city. Even with full agreement on LGBT equal rights, the words about war and taxes and government policies ramp quickly. The Irish redhead comes to her lone husband's side, "You're ganging up on him. Whenever we go anywhere this happens. I knew we shouldn't have come tonight. " The evening lasts a few more exchanges, then ends with her shouting, "He's a better person than any of you!"

"You won't show this on the film?" our host asks Jen when the rest of us get ready to leave.

We already have plenty of other footage from our few short hours in Burlington. Jen's RU12 (Are You One Too?) Center footage from this afternoon is a highlight. Dave had been hoping we'd get to meet Peg. As we walk in, she is writing e-mails in the computer room, a tiny older woman, plainly dressed for the rain-showered day, no-frills grey hair, a cloth bag to carry her papers.

Peg moved to Burlington in 1969, when I was just eight-years-old. She arrived in town married, "Heterosexual marriage was such a strong expectation back then." She might be my mom or dad's age; her story is different.

Recognizing her attraction to women, she found no resources at the library, only the degrading definitions of homosexuality current at the time. "That's not me," she knew. Over time, as she met lesbian women she began to understand her sexuality in a positive way.

"Coming out as lesbian in 1973, Burlington had no services and no organizations for LGBT people. "We had one weekly rap group that people came to for a place to talk. Everything else we've created. We're still working."

Magazines. Speeches. Papers. Causes. Issues. Original copies of *Common Woman* are framed on the walls of this room. Peg helped found this magazine to focus on women's rights.

I soak this woman in. Finding Peg on this first afternoon of the ride puts a marker on the map for me, not of geography, but of purpose. She is living the life I want to live, a vision, wrapped in layers and decades of experiences. She doesn't seem to be slowing down or giving up on her work. When I reach her age, I want the texture she has in her life, and I want a place in a small room where I can write e-mails to keep the fires burning.

Peg talks to us about the intersections between women's rights and LGBT rights. "Some of the women's studies' professors these days don't have activist experience. I worry the sense of movement isn't as strong as it used to be. Today you have some kids who have grown up and never experienced the struggle for rights."

Poetry Man stops me again. He's not pushing at the moment; this time he wants to talk. "People are going to read about gay kids who grew up and didn't have the same struggles, and they're going to think the world's all better now."

"Yeah?"

"But that's not what I want to know. What do you think, or do you think, there's any difference between a person with Peg's experience, and one of those kids who grew up not having to struggle through the same battles for LGBT rights?"

"I like the struggling people," I answer him back.

"Why?"

"I can talk to people if they know about struggle."

"Why is that?"

"Because that's my own life. I have good credentials, but they don't satisfy me." I start sharing the memory of a wedding.

"One time a couple from Indiana asked me to officiate their wedding even though the groom's dad was a seminary professor. I was nervous. I felt like a trespasser. This should have been Dad's wedding to do. It turned out there were issues beneath the surface. What I remember most about that wedding was the groom's brother, the one they'd warned was the black sheep of the family. After the service he asked if we could talk. We left the celebration, walked into town, and found a café where we ordered chocolate cake and beer. I listened for two hours, all about how he didn't make the grade in his family.

"Damn," I tell Poetry Man, surprised at myself. "I still get angry about that weekend when I remember it. This guy's dad could preach all about Jesus and love, and grace, and forgiveness to his classes, but he couldn't bring the message home to this son. His son felt only judgment for falling short of expectations. The professor was getting paid to teach about love, but the family dynamics held more power. I remember telling that black sheep son that he might be closer to understanding Jesus than his dad."

"You said that?" Poetry Man looks at me.

"Sure. Jesus only made sense to the people around him who were suffering or struggling. The people with the credentials, they had no need for Jesus, no understanding that we need love because we really can't control life. That black sheep son was drinking too much, going through too many relationships, going through too many jobs. But I could have talked to him all

night. He was eager to hear life might be about more than just measuring up.

"That's why I loved meeting Peg," I continue. "Her whole life seems to engage the struggle and the contradictions of life. She's still working at making a safer place for people to live, and she still has energy. In my experience, that's rare. As a pastor, I mostly waited around for the wheels to come off people's lives, like the black sheep son, like the strong father, like all of us who think we should be able to live a successful predictable life. When the journey finally breaks down, that's when we usually take a different look at life. No one ever seems to change because they're too comfortable or because I preach nice sermons."

Poetry Man sits for a moment, then brings me back to the manuscript. "So at the end of the conversation with Peg, you ask her what the big picture is, and she answers, 'Recognize our common humanity.'"

"Yeah, she said that two or three times."

"Common humanity. They're such plain words." Poetry Man lifts the phrase up. He asks me "Does a person have to struggle, does a person have to suffer, to recognize common humanity?"

I lean my head back on the couch and close my eyes, remembering the story-telling I did from the pulpit, of the people who found ways to hold meaning together, how often I'd preach that the beginning of thinking about faith and life is the bumper sticker, "Shit Happens." That always got a laugh. I was always trying to talk about suffering and trying to cushion the blow at the same time. I told listeners, "I'm not advocating suffering." Or I'd advise, "If you can avoid this in your own life, please do."

I have thought of these things often, but I have never said out loud what I am going to say now. I open my eyes, sit up straight, and look at Poetry Man.

"Yes. I believe a person has to suffer if we're going to recognize common humanity."

Poetry Man senses me wanting to give qualifications. He stops me before I can offer explanations and dilutions. "It's okay. Say your truth. Don't worry."

He gives the slightest smile. "No one's going to listen to you unless they're already there."

"Peg was a gift," Poetry Man tells me. "Don't try to be her. It's enough to be yourself."

Burlington, Vermont. With Dave.

The end of day one. Dave drive's me back to his apartment. He insists that he take the couch and I sleep on his bed. After an all-nighter on the plane, I'm grateful.

Chapter Three

A Riddle

JUNE FIFTEENTH. Up at six, toast and two bowls of cereal, I pedal through Burlington, heading east. Seeing the Main Street Barber sign on the way out, I stop for an opinion on my hair length. "Do what's practical," says the stylist. "People don't judge by hair anymore. Certainly not in Vermont." She takes another look at my twelve inches of summer-blond hair.

Jen has caught up to me and she is filming this encounter. She wants me to cut my hair. "You'll make a better first impression with short hair, especially with people who might listen if we can get the conversation started."

Since then I've been asking for reactions, and the conversations feel like déjà vu. Three years ago, preparing to unicycle the fifty states in support of Inupiat Eskimo people in Alaska, I also received suggestions to cut my hair. One potential donor remarked with concern, "Who's going to give money to a long-haired hippy on a unicycle?"

The irony struck me hard. I "pass" on every other stereotype in America—tall white man with two graduate degrees, two soccer-playing children, and one watercolor painter spouse of the socially acceptable, opposite gender. The Inupiat people I was riding in support of could never pass the automatic stereotype test—from the color of their skin to the accent on their lips, from the traditional foods of walrus, seal, and fish, to their 12,000-year-old hunting-gathering culture that shapes the soul of this people. What's a bit of long hair compared to these rich differences? In the end I kept the hair for my ride across the country. I decided to ride close to the margin.

Now we're back to hair again, Jen and Tan trying to make me look nice for the film. When I asked the hair question to my e-mail list before the start of Straight Into Gay America, I received dozens of replies. Opinions fell on both sides of the cut or keep conversation, but I felt unconvinced until Leslie Deatrick e-mailed. She did her undergraduate work at Michigan State University, while I served there as a campus pastor. Now she's deep into a Communications PhD.

> Lars,
> One of the axioms of communication is "you cannot not communicate," so even when we are silent, we communicate in many ways. Think about your audience. Knowing the audience is key to getting a message heard. You need to figure out what message your hair sends, and what message you wish to send. Sync the two together and you have your answer.
>
> I vote for a haircut. There is a ritual to a haircut, a transformation. I think it is right to prepare yourself for this next journey. I bet some of the hair on your head accompanied you on the last trip. Make this trip new, not One Wheel Part II. Becoming clean-shaven feels like a preparation and a fresh start.
>
> Besides, you can always bring a picture of your long hair (better yet, put a picture of it on a t-shirt) to get hippie credibility if you find you need it on the road.
>
> Best, Leslie

"Dear Jen and Tan," I wrote back before the ride started. "OK. I'll get a haircut." I sent a message to those in Burlington who are on my e-mail list, inviting someone to find a trendy gay barber who will read my online hair discussion and offer the perfect Straight Into Gay America hairstyle for my ride. But yesterday in Burlington turned out busy. No hairstyling arrangements were made.

I decide to wait on the haircut for a more convenient time. After this morning's Main Street Barbershop I decide to wait longer and check in with more hair stylists. I have plenty of time. And the road beckons, a 70-degree morning, with rolling terrain, deep green woods and the small farms of Vermont. I jump up on One Wheel and begin spinning my pedals toward Montpelier.

Richmond, Vermont. NBC News.

NBC News catches me ten miles east of Burlington. Ole and Gus spend almost two hours with me, filming and talking. I ride through hay fields and truck farms, passing the small communities of Richmond, Jonesville, and Bolton while they film out the back of their Ford Explorer. They stop often, and we get time to visit without the camera rolling. Ole recounts a bit of the civil union history from the year 2000.

"We heard predictions that marriage would be endangered, that our state would be overrun by outsiders, that our legislature would be dominated by gays and lesbians. A lot of protest money and protest organizations came into Vermont from outside the state. Five years later people say, 'Civil unions—what's the big deal?'"

We talk about the difference between civil union certificates and marriage certificates. The single difference is the title; every other word is identical. "Civil unions," says Ole, "were easier to accept than the word 'marriage'."

"Marketing," Gus quips.

Jen has stayed back in town to interview a woman we met yesterday. She catches up when Gus and Ole are almost finished. When they leave, she takes over the filming, leapfrogging ahead of me, framing in shots with Vermont barns in the background, signs announcing homemade honey, fresh eggs, maple syrup. She's got a lot of work ahead if she's going to make her story look like more than a unicyclist on break from the circus.

"And what is One Wheel to you?" asks Poetry Man, breaking into the silent reading. It's morning time. We usually meet at night. Sun streams in across his garden onto the now familiar couch.

"I swim," he tells me. "I understand how the rhythm of physical exercise works on the mind. I can see that part of your ride. I can see how riding a unicycle attracts attention and it starts conversations for you. But there's something in your riding that's more like church than circus. How do you answer when people ask if you do circus tricks?"

"Kids ask me often. Even after I've ridden a hundred miles in a day, a youngster will still ask me if I can do a trick."

More like church than a circus.

I ask Poetry Man if he remembers the story about Jesus when he goes up to the mountaintop with his disciples and they see a vision of the prophets? "Remember when the disciples want to build tents up there and stay up on the mountaintop forever?"

Poetry Man nods.

"And then Jesus says they have to go back down the mountain to real life. That's how unicycling is like church. The vision, the balance, is always a fleeting thing. Whenever I get up on One Wheel, I know I'm going to come back down. But while I'm up there, I'm balanced. Sometimes I battle windstorms, using everything I've learned to stay on top. Other times I ride a wide shoulder on a 70-degree day, my mind free to wander.

"Riding One Wheel is like opening Scripture,
when Scripture does what it's supposed to,
breaking down, building up, breaking
down, and building up your life,

depending on the day, the road,
and the weather when you open the text.
Scripture comes through your eyes.
One Wheel comes at my whole body,

eyes on the track my wheel
will cover, legs pushing, reacting
to the terrain, ears tuning to traffic,
nose finding smells of farm fields

and roadkill. I sweat a perfect balance
between my exertion and the moment.
You never know what's coming
until it arrives.

"One Wheel is where I take my conversations, and my questions, and see if the prophets will speak to my life, fit things together enough to face coming back down and keep trying to live my life. After you read Scripture you have to close the book and get back to living. After every worship service you have to say the benediction and head outside. But when you're up there…"

Poetry Man's looking at me, "And you're telling me you're the pastor who doesn't believe in God?" He starts reading again.

While he reads, I look out at the garden. If I were riding One Wheel, I'd pass this house in about four seconds.

A few more miles into the day I ask a bus driver for directions while he awaits his next run. He looks near retirement. "Why are you riding to Montpelier?"

"I'm going all the way to Baltimore," I reply.

"I've got nothing to say about gay rights," he says when he hears why I'm riding. Then he talks for ten minutes until he has to start his route. "Civil unions are just the way we do things here in Vermont. I know lots of gay and lesbian people, and they're as good neighbors as everyone else. Here in this state, we wouldn't have it any other way."

"Any problems?" I ask.

"No, none. A few people, just a few, aren't on board with civil rights. The only place I ever get bothered is when I go to Florida for vacation and people tell me I'm from that crazy radical state of Vermont."

Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream Factory rolls into view. I watch the tourist video and eat Cherry Garcia ice cream. Back on the road, pedaling 45 miles today, I return to my riding routine of eating all the food I want.

At Waterbury Wings I order "world famous" Fire-Hot-Honey-BBQ chicken wings. At the next table, a family agrees to talk with Jen for an interview. The parents are from Decatur, Illinois. "I've got nothing against gay people, anymore," says the stout, balding, bearded dad.

"Anymore?" I ask. "What do you mean?"

"Well, when I was a teen, some of us used to go down to the bus station to beat up gay people. We called them fags back then." The daughter looks embarrassed to hear her father speaking. She attends the University of Vermont in Burlington.

"What changed you?"

"Well, some of them were really tough," he laughs. "I wasn't winning the fights. What really made the difference is working in

the food industry. I work with a lot of gay people. They're no different from me."

Waterbury, Vermont. Waterbury Wings.

He tells me a few stories. I talk to his wife and daughter, too. Then Dad interjects again.

"One more salient point." He begins a new story, his voice different from before, slower, serious, telling how he and a friend drove from Iowa to Kansas to spend a week at a veteran's hospital with their war buddy who was dying. "I'm a Vietnam Veteran, and we Vets stick together."

On the trip back to Iowa the two friends drove through Topeka, Kansas. "We passed a church there. Picketers were outside with three and four year-old children, carrying signs saying GOD HATES FAGS. It disturbed us enough that we circled

around the block for a second view. I remember asking my friend, 'Is this what we fought for?'"

I'm guessing his daughter has never heard this story from her father. She's watching him from across the table, looking at him differently, at least for a moment, the weave of his life suddenly more complex, deeper than the coarse bravado of a carefully constructed exterior. I watch father and daughter now; they're underneath the everyday veneer, beyond their regular masks. This is what I used to wait for when I was a pastor. I know what to look for. I know what to do. Shut up.

That young fag-beater who went to Vietnam and then circled around the block now has a grown daughter, looking anew at her father, maybe ready to come around the block one more time and ask, together with Dad, what is worth fighting for? As I watch this daughter responding to her father's story, I know I ride for these times.

Rain begins falling. The bartender asks if I will show how I unicycle. I pedal over the floor of this old bar, floorboards creaking beneath my wheel, circling the pool table, accepting a beer he holds up to me while I unicycle. He tells us of a lodge nearby, "Two men run it. They do a lot of civil unions. And the coffee shop next door, two partnered women run that." This encounter is over. I head out the door to see what's around the block.

Day two. Already the web of stories spins faster than I can keep up with the opportunities. The last fifteen miles, south of Waterbury, I ride in pouring rain. A bicyclist passes me, then loops around to visit. He tells me to stop at the Red Hen Bakery in the morning.

"The owner's a bike nut. And their sticky buns are the best in New England."

An hour more of riding brings me to Ann-Marie's home. After talking to her on the phone yesterday, she offered to host me for the night. "There's a four-mile hill before you get to my house," she warned.

On the road in Vermont.

The grade is worth the ride. Here in North Fayston, I pedal by forest, occasional houses, following Shepherd's Brook. The paved road turns to dirt long before I reach Ann-Marie's home in the woods, complete with tipi and 18 foot tall wooden giraffe. Young children wait under the covered porch to greet my soggy arrival. They want to see me ride. Jen films me riding for the kids as I pedal around the driveway for them. When I go inside I realize the house is full with guests. Two lesbian couples and their kids have arrived before me. Sara and Danielle have four children. Barbara and Jane have one son. Once inside I see food is ready in the kitchen.

"Do you want a shower first?" Ann-Marie asks, pointing me down the hall. My clothes are as heavy with water as if I'd been swimming. I savor the hot shower and switch to my single change

of clothes, the pair of biking shorts, shirt and socks that exactly match the soggy ones I've just changed out of.

There's not much else in my daypack. Other than this change of clothes, I have a windbreaker, toothbrush, floss, notebook, pen, camera, cell phone. An extra inner tube, air pump and patch kit are my only tools. I bought the tiniest deodorant stick and toothpaste tube I could find—eight pounds of gear for five weeks.

If people like Dave and Ann-Marie keep inviting me in for the next month, I'll do fine. With kids playing in the background, we gather around the table for a potluck meal. I receive a riddle almost as soon as we begin. Barbara and Jane describe their civil union with great joy. With far more ambivalence, Sara and Danielle tell me about their marriage ceremony. "We wanted a civil union like other same-sex couples." Why does one female couple get a civil union and the other female couple end up with a marriage ceremony?

Answer: Danielle is transgender. Born with male features, Danielle's internal identity, her self-understanding has always been female. Many of us never question our gender identity, and we're surprised to learn when others do. For those who do question their gender, the questions and the issues never stop. Civil union? Marriage ceremony? That's just the start.

On Danielle's Pennsylvania birth certificate she's allowed to change just one item at a time. She got her name changed from Daniel to Danielle, and then after too much hassle, she gave up on having her gender updated from male to female. At least in Pennsylvania she can eventually fight her way through to getting her birth certificate changed. Danielle tells me some states don't allow any changes. Depending on their state of birth, some transgender people won't ever again qualify for a passport.

Talk turns to church. Sara first. "We got married in our Methodist church. Our pastor was great. He's one of our best friends. We used to lead music there with a band we called Joyful Noise. Eventually, though, we chose to leave."

Monpelier, Vermont. Sara and Danielle.

"We got tired of being the 'lesbian poster family' in our congregation," joins Danielle, "but the real reason for leaving is how the Methodist church keeps putting gay and lesbian pastors on trial. We couldn't keep supporting or participating in that system anymore. Now we go to an Episcopal church. It's very accepting."

"We both agree on being there," says Sara, "It's a shelter for us. A safe place. But I miss the Methodist service. I don't go so much for all that high church formality in the Episcopal worship service."

"I love the liturgy," responds Danielle, a self-proclaimed recovering Catholic.

A few moments before we'd been talking about the mushrooms in the salad, talking about foods we do and don't like.

"I love mushrooms," Danielle reported.

"I hate mushrooms," Sara had said. "How can people eat fungus?"

The term "queer," comes up. Once derogatory, this term now finds common use among the LGBT community as identification for anyone who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

"I don't like the word 'queer'." It's Sara again.

"I love 'queer'." Danielle adds her contradiction.

"The word seems so demeaning," says Sara. "I don't want a truckload of rednecks to drive by and shout 'queer' at me. That's scary."

"True," Danielle concedes, "but I like the way it describes difference, It pushes LGBT people to accept who we are."

Back to church talk, Barbara shares her experience. "I gave up on church. I couldn't keep going to worship and hearing the negative messages and fighting the fight for acceptance. But then," Barbara continues, "one day I passed by a church flying a rainbow banner, and I said to myself, 'Any church that flies a rainbow banner deserves one more chance.'"

Jane picks up the story to tell about their experience with this Unitarian Universalist Church. UU's, as they call themselves, describe their religion as liberal, keeping an open mind to the religious questions people have struggled with through the ages. They believe that personal experience, conscience and reason should be the final authorities in religion, and that religious authority does not lie in a book or person or institution, but in each person.

"We're so glad we checked out this church. We feel completely accepted there. Largely because of this church, because we felt we had a safe community for us to raise a family in, we decided to try to have a child. When we announced to the congregation I was pregnant, there were cheers."

"That's great," says Sara. "Celebration. That's what I want more of. I'm sick of gay people being just 'tolerated.' We can tolerate rashes, but we need to celebrate people."

The kids enjoy their play, but eventually parents start to eye them for bedtime. Before they go, Sara and Danielle invite me to

overnight with their family in Montpelier. The decision to start my ride in Vermont centers on this state becoming the first to enact civil unions for gay and lesbian people. Montpelier is the capital of the state where the decision was reached in the year 2000. I have been looking forward to spending time there.

When everyone leaves, I sit back down at the kitchen table to write in my journal. In the background Ann-Marie is playing guitar and singing a song she wrote to make it through this past year. Jen is sitting with her on the couch; afterwards I hear them talking. Ann-Marie's marriage is ending.

After they go to bed, I write in the silence that envelops the house. Half-an-hour later Jen comes walking down from her room. "Couldn't sleep up there. They were talking about bears. Mind if I sleep on the couch?" She's asleep before I finish another page. In the morning I find her in the same spot. Later, when I ask how she slept, "Not as good as usual. I kept waking up."

Jen is behind her camera for hours each day, asking questions, probing people's lives, searching to discover the stories for her documentary. Maybe the intensity of the conversations during the day doesn't ease up enough at night for good sleep. Maybe Jen processes these conversations in her sleep. I'm sure I do, too, but I also have the unicycle, giving me hours of solitude and reflection each day. My best thoughts surface when I'm active. On this ride, I stop often at sidewalk curbs or storefront benches to pull out my notebook and jot down ideas.

The ride to Montpelier is short, and the weather has cleared, so I take time for more visits. Euan Bear, the editor of Vermont's LGBT newspaper *Out in the Mountains*, drives over from Burlington to interview me at the lesbian-owned coffee shop in Waterbury, next door to yesterday's bar visit. Looking to be in her early fifties, the black bowler hat she wears fits her mixture of realism and humor.

Almost immediately Euan shows her ability to laugh at herself. "There are times I've gotten more paranoid than necessary. When my partner and I moved from Burlington into rural Franklin County, we felt a bit concerned. Soon after we moved we woke up one morning to a broken mailbox. We felt sure it was gay hatred until a neighbor told us our

stretch of road has always had mailboxes smashed in a juvenile game of 'mailbox baseball'.

"Two months after the mailbox was smashed, I went down to the end of the driveway one night and found that someone had painted a bight yellow letter L on the edge of the road at the end of our driveway. I got some black spray paint and covered the letter over, worried about who would mark our house as lesbian, how would they know so soon? A couple of days later, going up to the village, I saw that a few yards down the road, there was another yellow L, and a few more yards later another, and another! It turned out that the L was a bracket showing the highway line painters which way the dotted line for the passing section should go!"

After this story, Euan turns serious. "Life is a lot better now that Equal Rights has passed in Vermont, it has made a huge difference in our lives, absolutely. But there are still plenty of challenges if you're LGBT in this state, especially for people living outside the more liberal and accepting areas of Vermont. Legal equality doesn't magically change a state into a paradise for LGBT, even after 5 or 6 years.

"For instance," she begins. "We're still working on getting nondiscrimination language passed in the legislature to explicitly protect trans-folk... And the LGBT anti-violence agency in our state continues to document dozens of hate events each year, including verbal harassment, physical abuse and assault, property damage and family rejection. Even today in Vermont, some high school kids are thrown out of their homes when they come out.

"And you know what else?" Euan asks. I sense her list is far longer than this iceberg tip she's giving me. "I even have to be cautious when I ask politicians my questions of concern for LGBT people. If they give a supportive answer in public, they might be voted out of office for their inclusive views. That happened in 2000. It's still a danger today."

Euan takes my questions for awhile, but finally holds up her hand, "I'm supposed to be doing the interview," she protests. We talk for another half-hour. At the finish I ask her what value she sees in my ride. Her answer takes me by surprise.

"Well," she begins, "truthfully, I hear you trying to connect to the LGBT experience of living in the margin, but other than your unicycle it's a little hard for me to feel this connection. Your gender, your color, your family, and your education are all so mainstream. You may never fully understand what it feels like to not even know your culture's own name until your late teens or twenties. You may never understand being beaten, reviled, taunted, disowned, dismissed, evicted, stripped of children and family when you finally find that culture. And you may never understand how it feels to have this happen not because of some political position you've *chosen* or some heinous act you've *committed*, but because of *who you are* in the center of your being.

"You want to know the power of civil unions in Vermont? In the face of all these experiences that LGBT people have, the state finally affirmed our relationships and made them official. That's why long-time couples cry and cannot speak when they come to Vermont for their civil unions."

For a moment she says nothing; then begins again "As for your ride…" She stops again and I see tears forming in her eyes, "This comes from a person whose history has three suicide attempts in it…I can't say how much this means to me, that you're a straight person and you're making a public stand for LGBT people. Who better to speak to the opposition than someone they can at least partly identify with?"

We end our conversation and I return to pedaling One Wheel toward Montpelier. I keep seeing Euan's tears. Along with others, she is putting my unicycle ride into larger perspective. Euan and Danielle and Sara and Peg and David are forcing me to take my role as an ally more seriously.

LGBT strategists focus on a variety of avenues for achieving equal rights. Some lobby political organizations. Others work to change religious understanding and church rules. Encouraging people to come out about their sexuality is another emphasis. Whatever these strategists attend to, everyone agrees on the importance of allies.

Allies are the ones who can speak up without being accused of holding selfish motivations. Allies are the ones who can most eas-

ily be heard when they make the point that the struggle is for equal rights, not for special rights.

Accusing the equal rights movement of being a special rights movement is one of the favorite anti-LGBT strategies. Despite all the rhetoric and all the temptation to believe it, the special rights claim falls flat. In my state of Washington there are still no protections against evicting tenants or firing employees when they are found out to be gay. A Texas law prohibiting same sex activity even in one's private home was only recently struck down by the Federal Supreme Court. The special right this country was founded on in our Declaration of Independence was the special right to equal rights.

Anti-discrimination laws for gender, race, religion, and disability have all evolved to address specific shortcomings in our nation's commitment to equal rights. The same process is now underway for LGBT rights. And as white abolitionists helped the cause of black slaves, and as forward thinking men helped the cause of women's rights, so too, allies play a part in the journey toward LGBT equal rights.

My conversation with Euan starts me thinking about how to balance my motivation to unicycle for fun with this journey as an ally. So far, unicycling is a good way for me to work more deeply into this advocacy. Maybe I don't need to try to balance this journey. Maybe I just need to stay open to hearing what comes my way. Conversations so far have surprised me with their depth and honesty and I'm still only beginning this ride. Perhaps as the journey develops I'll discover how to be a better ally and learn what to do with these gifts I'm receiving from this tour.

My ride from Waterbury to Montpelier takes two hours. I parallel the Mad River, famous for canoeing. Road shoulders are wide enough I can focus on the farms, the houses, and the forests I ride through. Halfway to Montpelier I'm called over to the side of the road for another conversation. Two older women are walking along the road. One waves, and I hop off to talk. They could be partners, mother and daughter, two friends. I don't know. Turns out they're on vacation from Alabama. The younger of the two has a quick answer when I ask about LGBT people.

"People should follow their hearts."

"Follow their hearts?"

"Yes, we should live our dreams. We should live our love. I should know. I didn't." Looking at me, she adds, "It looks like you're living your dream."

Montpelier, Vermont. Downtown.

I've been meeting people like this woman ever since I began touring by unicycle, the kind who stop on a Montana highway, far from any town, to ask me questions. Some people see a wheel rolling down the road and they start thinking maybe their own dreams aren't so far fetched. Others just want to tell me about a dream they wished they'd dared to try when they had the chance. The pastor in me hears holiness at each of these moments. Before I go I offer the lines from Mark Twain I use for my own compass.

Twenty years from now
you will be more disappointed
By the things you did not do,
than by the things you did do,

So throw off the bowlines,
set sail from the safe harbor
Catch the trade winds in your sails.
Explore. Dream. Discover.

“Say it one more time,” she smiles. “I like those words.”

Chapter Four

Death and Resurrection

MONTPELIER. Someone yesterday boasted how small the city is, "Only capitol in the country without a McDonalds." I ride onto Main Street, past the capitol dome, shining gold. A few blocks of old-style commerce and I'm out the far side of town, pedaling a steep hill to Danielle and Sara's home. In front of their home, as

promised, I find their landmark, six bright new front-yard telephone poles. "We came home from vacation last year and found this landscaping surprise."

Again I enter a full house, kids running everywhere. Methodist pastor friend Mitch and his family are here.

"Does everyone really know each other in Vermont?" The small-town small-state feel here is different from anywhere else I've traveled.

"Not quite, but almost," answers Mitch. "Hey, while we wait for the pizza, would you give my son some unicycling tips? Micah and I got unicycles last summer." We walk across the street to an empty parking lot to practice. I show them tips, and think of my kids at home, missing them for the first time since the plane ride. The beginning of this ride has been so fast paced it has absorbed all my energy. Now, watching Mitch and Micah I think of Anne and KariAnna and Kai; we've spent so much time practicing and riding together. I tell Mitch about the small unicycling clubs we've started in places where we've lived. Kai learned when he was six years old. KariAnna learned first. She was seven when she started trying.

As we walk back to dinner, I ask the question I have for Mitch. "How do you keep your energy as a pastor? From what Sara and Danielle tell me, you work really hard for LGBT rights, but you Methodists are even slower than us Lutherans about inclusion."

Mitch doesn't miss a beat. "I love preaching. That's my energy. On a Sunday morning, if I see three people who have light bulbs turn on with a new insight or a new thought, I'm set for the week. That's all I need."

Later in the evening, Keith visits. He's served as the governor's liaison for LGBT issues for longer than any governor has held office. "They keep asking me to stay on," he laughs.

Again I ask, "What gives you energy to do your work?"

"People," he answers. "Whenever I'm on a project, if that effort helps just one person, that keeps me coming back."

Montpelier, Vermont. Capitol Building.

Poetry Man and I haven't seen each other for a week. This is another daytime meeting. It's late afternoon, shadows from the maple are stretching past the roses. He's brewed us cups of oolong tea.

"Alright," he starts, clearing his throat after a long stretch of silent reading.

"You asked Mitch and Keith what works for them. Did you ever have that kind of energy in church?"

"Yeah, I used to feel that energy, too. I used to have a lot of fun. One Christmas sermon I hung diapers on the church pulpit, like garlands, and preached how Jesus was a real baby, not a magical creature, totally dependent on human care, diapers, food, everything. I still think that's a good way to visualize Jesus and each other. In diapers. All of us dependent on each other.

"The next Christmas I received a card," I tell Poetry Man. "A woman named Mary, she wrote to tell me how that sermon

changed her life. I think that's what Mitch and Keith were telling me works for them."

"You had some good times."

"I did. I used to feel good energy when I took risks on Sunday morning in the pulpit. One time in Nome I preached how I would treat gay or lesbian people the same as straight people, and how I didn't know whether my baby kids would grow up gay or straight. I told the congregation how much I hoped they'd find a welcome there, including if they grow up gay.

"Up to that time I'd been focusing on the issues of race and culture between Native and non-Native people. I thought those were the most pressing issues for our church and our town. A month later, though, Sara came to sit in our living room. Late twenties. Great basketball player. She managed the rec center in Nome. Sara hung out on the fringe of church, but her mom was the church organist and church secretary. She visited us that day to tell Anne and me she was lesbian. We watched her struggle with telling her Mom. And we watched how hard a time her mom had with accepting Sara, and how she insisted Sara couldn't tell her Dad, but how when she did, her Dad was fine with Sara. I got to share in that journey. Watching life play out for Sara and people like her always felt like the holy stuff. If I hadn't risked that sermon, I wouldn't have received that story."

"So why aren't you still in the pulpit?"

"I think the reasons sort of piled up. Remember how I told you my campus ministry review committee called me a Lone Ranger and said it was time for me to go?"

"Yes."

"I'd already announced a year earlier that I wanted to leave the next summer, at the end of my four-year appointment. I told the church early so they could find my replacement. But that spring, when the senior pastor of the church decided he, too, would be leaving, people started coming up to me right away and asking if I'd stay for the interim time until they found a new senior pastor.

"At first I just laughed. That's not church procedure. Interims get appointed from outside the church. But after the first dozen people asked me, I knew I needed to listen. Bad decision. The senior pastor got mad at me. The bishop got mad. I was stepping outside of the rules and the customs of the church.

"And that's what the national review committee got me for, why they called me a Lone Ranger. It didn't matter that I volunteered for this review. Since I was leaving, I didn't have to get reviewed, but I volunteered for the sake of the congregation and the next pastor. It didn't matter that I invited everyone and anyone to come to the sessions with the review committee. Over seventy showed up over a period of two days. Members of the congregation, of the community, and of the campus, including professors and graduate students, and undergrads. We'd done innovative work with students, and we always had one of the largest student groups at the annual national gathering. It didn't matter that the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. They even wrote in the review if I wanted to do campus ministry again I should be under the supervision of an elder mentor."

"Are you still mad?"

"Only when I think about it. I don't think about this stuff much anymore."

"What are you thinking about right now?"

"Whether anyone would care about this story, would listen to it all the way through. When I was a kid I was a rotten storyteller. I was too shy to talk in school. And when I told stories people seemed to always lose interest before I finished. I got real good at watching people's eyes to see if they were still listening, and mostly they weren't. I kept that watching habit on Sunday mornings. When I was preaching, I was always gauging people's reactions, trying to make sure I kept them to the end of the story. I used to get so nervous when I preached, but I think that fear finally turned me into a decent storyteller.

"But telling this story now scares me. I'm fine with talking about the review but it seems so removed from what this unicycle ride is about. This would be a hard preach on a Sunday morning, hard to keep people from falling asleep.

"The problem with all this," I continue. "The problem with these stories of mine, is they end up feeling like just a diary, when I talk to you about my own life instead of the ride."

"Lars, everything is diary. You asked Mitch and Keith where they got their energy because its part of your diary."

He looks at me, "You're on this ride because it's part of your diary, too. Somewhere in the journal of your life is the reason you didn't just cut those people off when they asked you to stay on as the interim, or whatever they were hoping for.

There's a reason their words mattered more than the bishop's words, even when it got you in trouble.

"Maybe," continues Poetry Man, "you like the positive attention, but I don't believe that's the only reason you ride unicycles and get bad evaluations from churches."

"There's another part of this story," I tell Poetry Man. "Plenty of people were happy with church the way it was."

"And it sounds like plenty of people weren't happy, too. And that doesn't matter one bit. That's their story to tell. This isn't statistical data. This is your story." Poetry Man turns on me, and with a jerk of his torso he leans right into my face.

Any excuse I use to get away from story brings this same intense reaction. Voice rising, anger and frustration evident, he tries again to penetrate my cover, to drill into me a deeper respect for story. "You told me your Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has spent the last five years and over a million dollars to study what they're going to do about homosexual people in the church. All that time, and all that money, and what do you do? You go ride a unicycle for five weeks. Why? If you don't tell that story, of why you made a choice like that, a choice no one else made, this will be nothing more than circus. I have no interest in a survey. I want to know your story."

The little kid inside me remembers my bad storytelling, and the glazed listeners, and I fear those memories repeating. The reporter role I imagined for myself is slipping away, along with the safety it provided. If I want Poetry Man to see me through on this journey, I'll have to write my life at the same time I write this ride.

"Listen," says Poetry Man, his voice coming back down, growing gentler. "I am always going to love you for riding Straight Into Gay America." He takes another breath. "You can do this next part, too. Let's keep going." He turns gold rim reading glasses back towards the page.

When the visitors go home, Jen keeps film rolling. Sara and Danielle talk two more hours, here in their living room where stringed instruments hang from walls. Yesterday, they'd argued over mushrooms, liturgy, and the word "queer". These two even look far different from one another. Sara has tight curls of blond hair. Danielle, much taller, has hair of jet black. Tonight, again, despite different tastes, they reveal close hearts.

"I knew Danielle when she was still Daniel," says Sara. "My mom is the one who told me Danielle was transitioning. She called me right before Easter Dinner and said, 'Daniel is transitioning. He, I mean she, might be wearing a dress tomorrow. I want you to use the right pronouns when you see each other.'

"I still don't consider myself lesbian," Sara continues, telling about her husband of 13 years, and their relationship and their children. "The four children are the best part of what we had together. We've always celebrated our children. Now I'm a partner in a female marriage, but I don't love Danielle as a gender. I love her as a person. I call myself hetero-flexible.

"Actually," she continues, "The least interesting part of our lives is us being a lesbian couple." She points around the house to their children, their music, their regular daily life. Sara teaches. Danielle works for an alternative energy company. Sara tells of her social activism.

"I've always tried to help with social issues. LGBT rights were important to me long before Danielle and I got together, but after Danielle and I got together, people stopped respecting my words. I have lived as a white, heterosexual woman for most of my adult life, and now I know what a privileged position that really is. When I spoke out about civil unions or other social issues, people listened to me as a heterosexual person. I had a voice. I was credible, because I was part of the majority. When Danielle and I got together, my voice was silenced when I most needed to be heard. Even though I don't identify primarily as gay, people put me in that category. What bothered me most was that my desire to see all families valued and supported was suddenly perceived as selfish interest."

Danielle hugs Sara more closely, then begins to tell how her own story is opposite, how instead of losing impact she has come to new life. "I knew when I was eight years old that my identity is female. All my interests were about girl things. I knew I wanted to be a girl. But I had no one I could tell.

"When I grew up, in the body of a man, everything was a lie—every relationship, every encounter at work and at home, everything. From the age of fifteen until I started my transition at thirty-eight, not a day went by I didn't contemplate suicide."

"What made you finally transition after all those years?"

Lowered voice, "I don't want the kids to hear this, but I started my transition with a gun in my mouth. I was at the end, the very end, of trying to live.

"You know how you were talking about Church Street in Burlington, and your friend Dave finding it such a safe and welcoming place? Church Street was like death row for me. I used to cross-dress and go there some weekends, just to have a place where I could walk around as female. But whenever I did, even there, some gang of young kids would come up and surround me, and someone would always taunt me, 'we should kill you and get rid of you.' I had no safe place, anywhere. Life was hell."

"What's it like now?"

"I'm finally who I am," Danielle says, and words echo in my ears, God's self-introduction to Moses. "I am who I am."

"Death and resurrection?" I hate to use this tired language anymore, but Danielle nods; she knows what these words mean.

"It really is death and resurrection. I lost myself completely to become who I was all along."

"In church, we almost always talk about death and resurrection as something Jesus did, like it's not about us, like it's something someone else does for us, like we can avoid it."

"Exactly," says Danielle, "But when you come through it yourself you know a lot more about what life is meant for."

"Danielle's demons all used to be inside of her," says Sara. "All those years. Now the demons are on the outside, but at least now she can be her real self."

Sara gives an example, telling how Danielle doesn't go to the doctor anymore, if she can help it.

"I used to call for an appointment whenever I was sick," says Danielle. "Now I lay around for a week before I finally get courage to face a doctor. None of them know how to deal with me. All except one of them have never been able to talk to me. They talk to Sara, as if I'm not even there. They can't handle me being transgender."

"Transgenders are the outsiders of the outsiders," Sara states. "Some states are passing laws so no transgender person can ever get married, even to a person of the opposite sex."

Chapter Five

Heteroflexibility

WILLIE GIVES directions when we call from Sara and Danielle's home, "You'll see the house number, 607, on the mailbox. That's our only marker. Some of our guests appreciate the privacy." This morning Jen and I are driving to the bed and breakfast we heard about from Waterbury Wings.

Turning into the driveway we come upon a bigger sign, announcing Moose Meadow Lodge, a stunning log home, surrounded by lawn and forest, set on a gentle hillside.

The peeled log posts on the front porch have branches still sticking out, cut two feet from the trunk. This porch is a manicured forest. Inside, Greg has decorated the house with trophies from his hunting trips. A good job with IBM has given resources for these pursuits. He keeps his eye open for treasures from auctions and sales, enough so he's created theme rooms for each of the four guest rooms in the house. In one of the room's he's hung a dozen creel-fishing baskets.

The home tour is a parade of stories. Every wall we come to brings another experience from Greg. No wonder people reserve rooms here; I could listen to him all day long. Greg has even served as a Justice of the Peace, allowing him to officiate at

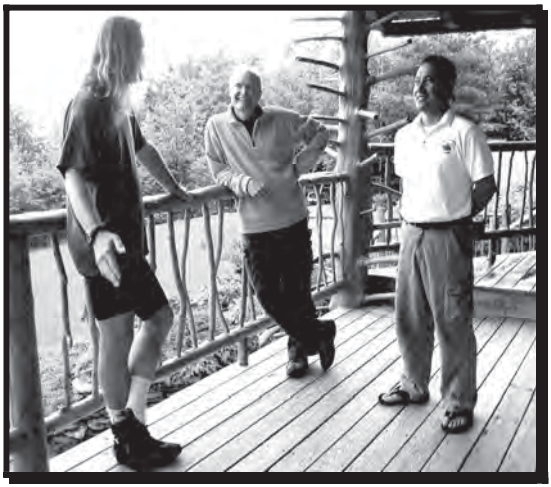
marriages and civil unions. Since 2000 he has led hundreds of civil unions here at Moose Lodge and around the state.

"You'll often find more emotion at a civil union. A lot of couples never expected to live to see the day when they could publicly confirm their relationship and their commitment."

Greg tells of one couple who'd been together for fifty years. "I remember in the morning, practicing for the service, I told the couple I would say the words of their vows, bit by bit, and they could repeat their vow after me. I said the first line, and then I waited. There was no response, so I looked up, prepared to say the words again. The men were both crying, and everyone who was there was crying. So I went on to the other partner, said the first line, and waited again. He couldn't say a word either. And that was just the rehearsal."

I listen to Greg, astonished again at what a mixed-up world we live in. Heterosexual lovers aren't supposed to live together until they get married. Homosexual people can live together fifty years, and then find it a miracle they can finally get married, even if it's still not equal, still just a state-sanctioned civil union.

At the last election Greg lost the Justice of the Peace position by four votes. Vermont has 1500 Justices throughout the state; unpaid, elected, local government positions that hear tax appeals and oversee elections. The duties of the position have evolved since establishment in 1777. In 1975 Justices became eligible to officiate marriages statewide. Civil Unions were included in 2000. "Losing that election put me in a quandary," Greg tells us. "These civil unions mean so much to people, and they've become an important part of my life. But without being a Justice of the Peace or a minister I couldn't do services anymore. I knew you can just go online and get registered as a minister, but I have a lot of respect for the years of training most pastors go through, so I didn't want to take a shortcut.



Waterbury, Vermont. With Greg and Willie.

"I struggled with what to do, but eventually I realized how important it felt for me to assist couples with their civil unions. So I did a lot of research, and eventually I found the Universal Ministries, out of Milford, Illinois. Their understandings seem open and inclusive, and I received my ministry certificate through them."

"What's that like?" I ask.

"It's good. I have respect for churches and pastors, and I didn't do this to create any conflict with church. This gives me the permission I need from the state."

After the tour, sitting in the dining room that overlooks lawn and meadow, we eat the Philippine pastries Willie has prepared. While Jen positions her camera for an interview, they talk about their common Philippine roots. Jen sets up a shot of Willie and

Greg's hands twined together, the glint of their two rings reflecting upwards. Then Greg takes off his ring and tells its story, of the meaning behind each sculpted part of their bonding band.

Three years after their civil union, I can still sense the magic of that moment, and the solid settled partnership they enjoy. Greg and Willie moved from Washington DC and Virginia to Vermont in 1996. They came for the land, and for this bed and breakfast. Civil unions arrived after they did.

I ask what civil unions have meant for them.

Greg and Willie's Civil Union.

"Lots of things," replies Willie, "I am now listed as Greg's next of kin. My family loves Greg, but for some couples, this right means they now have guaranteed rights to visit and make decisions for their partner during times of sickness or hospital stays. We can now pass on our inheritance to each other without the danger that families would step in and take the inheritance away from the partner. That's actually happened to other couples. Adoption is easier, and raising children is easier for those couples who have kids. We now have all the state rights of other couples in Vermont.

"But," continues Willie, "we only have state rights, we don't have any of the 1,138 federal rights that pertain only to marriages of a man and a woman. For instance, Greg and I pay an extra hundred-and-twenty dollars per month for health insurance, because we can't be listed as spouses. That's fourteen hundred dollars per year, just for our medical insurance. We pay extra because we can't be married. Those things add up."

"What would you say to the woman I met yesterday, who blames gay people for provoking unrest in Vermont during the civil union process?"

"Gays caused the unrest?" Greg asks.

"That's what she said, 'The gays caused the hate.' She was maybe in her mid-fifties. I met her at a coffee shop. At first she didn't want to talk, but when I got her to elaborate, she said, 'They left us no choice. It was rammed down our throat. Don't get me wrong. I love gay people. My boss is gay. My best friend is lesbian.'"

"Gays caused the hate?" Greg asks a second time, sitting with these words, before he begins to speak careful words. "Yes, there was turmoil. She's right about that. But I can't understand why she blames gay people. Actually, what happened was the opposite. A lot of hatred toward gays came out during the hearings. Some of our legislators experienced gay hating for the first time in their lives. From those experiences they realized gay people needed protection. The hatred helped them decide to vote yes. Civil unions didn't take away rights from heterosexual people, they granted rights to gay people. I don't understand what this woman tried to say to you.

"Listen," Greg says, "We're a gay-friendly place here at Moose Meadow, but we're not exclusively serving gays. In fact, Willie and I don't tell guests we're gay unless they want to know, and we don't advertise we're gay. We advertise in all sorts of places, both gay specific and general publications. Heterosexual people don't announce their sexual orientation, so we figure we don't have to either. We've only had maybe two people who have come and then after checking in, they decided to leave.

"One situation seems funny when we look back. A couple came out from their room and saw a bunch of men in the kitchen. They got uncomfortable and left. The irony was, those were straight men here that weekend, using Moose Meadow for a retreat.

"On the other hand, we have straight couples who come here because they have such a good time with us and with our guests. One couple started coming back regularly and finally asked if any of our gay guests felt uncomfortable because they were here. I told them 'Absolutely not.' They were relieved and told us, 'We're so glad, because we have such a great time being around your guests. We just wanted to make sure they weren't uncomfortable with a straight couple here.'

"We try to create a special experience for people when they come to Moose Meadow. Mostly, I believe our guests feel very satisfied."

Time flies as we talk. A vendor has arrived to discuss bed and breakfast business with Willie. Jen and I need to get back to Montpelier. Jen asks Willie what he would like to say about his life when he turns 80, what kind of reflections he has.

Willie thinks for a moment, looks around at Greg and at Moose Meadow Lodge, and smiles, "I tell Greg often: if I were to die soon, not to worry. I'm content with my life. I'm living my dream right now."

As our car crunches down the gravel road, I take a last look back at the lodge.

As we drive away, my mind is stuck on the image of the 50-year couple's civil union. The irony of my own life is that the church didn't prevent my marriage, the church forced it. In some ways I feel I've been packaged my whole life, from the buzz cut at the Air Force Academy, to my time at seminary. Without my seminary experience I would not be riding Straight Into Gay America today.

In 1987, the year before I started seminary in Berkeley, four high-achieving students had returned to school from their internship year, reporting how much they liked being pastors, and by the way, "We're gay." The students narrowly missed approval for ordination. By the time I entered seminary the next fall, a full-scale reaction had begun. The targets were any gay and lesbian students who wouldn't pledge celibacy. The Rev. Craig Settledge came from ELCA headquarters in Chicago to announce new Visions and Expectations for pastors. In my second year of seminary, my local synod went further in defining the acceptable package for a conforming pastor, creating a statement for each student's agreement and signature.

> "The only appropriate place for genital sexual activity is within the confines of a heterosexual married relationship."

The targets of this statement were gay and lesbian students, but I ended up in its sights. Anne and I were living together at the time, committed to exploring our possibilities for a lifetime of marriage together. We were choosing to live together, not to make light of marriage, but because we took marriage seriously. Both of us had family issues we hoped to uncover, to see how we could fit our lives to one another.

The day of my candidacy committee meeting, we met on the seminary campus, six of us gathered around a dark walnut table that had seen many of these events before. I'd been through two other meetings like this, and both had gone well. This meeting concerned only the signing of the agreement.

"I could sign your statement," I agreed, "but no gay or lesbian pastor with a partner could sign this without lying."

Based on our two previous meetings, my candidacy committee offered encouragement for my prospects as a pastor, "But we need your signature."

The meeting lasted an hour. I explained reasons why Anne and I were choosing to live together. I explained how the previous spring we'd announced our engagement and already set the date of our wedding for the following June 23rd. I explained that signing this statement allowed me a way forward, but it closed the door on gay or lesbian students, unless they chose to lie to get past the gatekeepers.

I asked them to approve me without forcing me to sign. At the end, I felt positive about our meeting. My pastor mentor had come along for support and together we stepped out while the committee conferred in private. Ten minutes later we returned to the room to hear their decision.

"We regret to inform you,
we are recommending your removal
from the ordination process."

I still find it hard to return and retrieve all the emotions from this time. I remember attending worship at seminary the next day, the annual Founders Day worship, a traditional service with those presiding dressed in extravagant robes. Following a centuries old ritual, raising their hands to heaven, begging for God's blessing, I found myself crying at the incongruity between this worship and my meeting of the day before. Worship seemed so false after the prejudice of the church had just kicked me out.

Everywhere before in my life, I had discovered connections between reasons and actions. Now the thread fell apart. Seminary had been teaching us about the freedom of the gospel, and how Jesus constantly had his attention on the outsiders, and how the gospel of love provided the pattern for our lives. Jesus demonstrated this over and over again. Whenever there was a conflict with the custom or tradition of the times, Jesus chose the outsider, the blind man, the sick woman, the tax collector, and the prostitute. The only people Jesus had a hard time with were church and civil authorities.

Now the church was once again excluding outsiders, this time gay and lesbian pastors. For myself, I never claimed Anne and my living together was perfect. But we were trying, as best we could, to develop and honor our relationship to each other. During the whole process, not one committee leader would talk with us about the work we were seeking to do for our life together. We were simply rule breakers, non-conforming to the acceptable packaging of the Lutheran church. One of the professors in my evaluation group was even a favorite Christian Ethics teacher. A month later she would promise to me during a meeting, "I will never again do to another student what I did to you."

In the meantime, I felt
all alone, me against rules,
learning more about prejudice and packaging
than I ever wanted.

The recommendation of my committee passed on to the full candidacy committee for their final recommendation. I spent two weeks on the phone with every committee member I could contact, arguing against their judgment. "How," I asked, "does this statement have anything to do with evaluating whether compassion is present?" I asked them not to remove me from seminary.

When word came back from the full committee, I received an option. Get married quickly or leave the seminary at the end of the term.

"Good," I replied, "we already have our wedding date set for June 23rd in Decorah, Iowa. That's just eight months away. "

"No," replied the person enforcing the decision. "The committee meant 'very quickly.' You need to be married within two or three weeks."

If I'd been alone I would have left, but seminary wasn't just about me anymore. Anne and I talked for days. We spent hours with our mentor pastor, Steve Jackson. Both of them encouraged me. "You have lots to offer once you get through seminary."

Steve counseled me from his own experience at the edge of the church. I knew how hard it was for him to stay on that knife-edge between the inside and the outside of the church. His art background; his visits with despair; he stayed as a pastor only because of the truth he'd found in the Christian tradition, that God is sensed most deeply in the suffering and the mystery of the world. He rebelled against the church's push for programs and success. All Steve wanted was to hear stories, and share stories, and find those places where people could see that gift and grace lay hidden under all our everyday assumptions.

"If you stay," he told me, "it'll be lonely, but you'll find your place in the margin. You'll find your closest friends there." His words felt like blessing while church was feeling like a curse. I knew he wanted company.

Anne understood what Steve was telling me about theology, but I heard her words differently. They reached me as a promise then, of how she would view me, of how she would respect me for my journey and my decisions, even in the tense times.

Maybe Anne views me as she does because she's a special education teacher. That's been her seminary classroom, where she learned her lessons about grace. I've watched her work in her classroom, watched her use her own hand to form a child's small fingers into the sign for cup, then lift the juice so the kid could drink, then wipe the drool as if it was the most regular thing in the world. Sometimes after half-a-year of this the kid would learn to make that sign when he or she was thirsty. Sometimes the kid would not.

I've watched Anne talk with parents thrust out to an edge of society they did not choose, terrified about all the implications of raising their special-needs child and all the decisions involved in providing life-long care. So many challenges. Everything from home behavior to dealing with state and federal agencies for assistance. Anne never denied the challenges, but her talent was to raise up the gift. "Special-needs children help us learn how to love. They show us what's important in life. They have a lot to offer."

Maybe Anne views me as she does because her oldest brother is paranoid schizophrenic. She spent her teen years adjusting to the valedictorian son of the family moving home from graduate school to pace the hallway at night, tapping on the walls, trying to find the source of the signals that were spying on him.

Whatever I learned at seminary about the edge of life, Anne learned just by getting out of bed each day. After fifteen years, this part of Anne is still rock solid. She still reminds me I have a lot to offer.

After a week of those conversations about whether or not to get married to stay in seminary, Anne and I walked to the Oakland County Courthouse. On November 5, 1989, we signed the piece of paper that transferred me into an acceptable category.

We'd already been planning our honeymoon, a six-month tandem bicycle tour in Europe, and we had some gear, including a new tent. The night of signing the marriage certificate we set up our tent in the living room of our apartment. Anne cried all night long, tormented by the contradictions of our decisions.

My final meeting with the candidacy committee took place one month later, in Los Angeles. We met in a hotel conference room near the airport; I remember the glass table and the white fabric of the chairs. The evaluators were all different people than from my previous meeting. And I was different. Taking my seat I held my marriage certificate in my palm, and I slapped it onto the table. I slapped it hard.

"You seem angry," observed the convener of the meeting.

"You're damn right I'm angry. Without this piece of paper I was nothing. With this piece of paper I can be a pastor. Of course I'm angry. You don't care about me. You only care about this piece of paper."

Amazingly, now that nothing remained to do or say, they seemed to understand. I went home with a verbal apology from the committee, and two weeks later a long letter of written apology arrived in the mail. They'd even agreed to recommend my internship year be moved to my fourth year to accommodate our honeymoon and the extra classes I'd taken to graduate early.

Coming to classes at seminary turned into hard duty for the rest of the school year. Some gay and lesbian students were kicked

out. Others lied to stay in seminary, their only way to get through the hoops to ordination. My stomach turned in knots every time I crossed Grizzly Peak Road and entered seminary grounds. My anger did not leave.

One final meeting. One final shock. At the end of the school year, barely a month before our wedding, the professors met to grant formal approval of fourth year internships for students. Anne and I had made our plans based on the recommendation of my Los Angeles committee. The faculty refused to grant approval. As the dean relayed to me,

> "The faculty have serious doubts
> about your ability to do ministry.
> You have seemed so angry this year.
> They need you to return to seminary
> after your internship so they can evaluate
> your suitability for ordination."

Anger is a serious double bind, even for Lutherans. If you're nice and polite, leadership can ignore you. If you show frustration or anger, leadership gets anxious. Victims of injustice end up taking the blame for the discord. Martin Luther King Jr. played this out with the FBI.

In the month before our wedding, Anne and I scrambled to rearrange all our plans for the coming two years, including internship and hospital chaplaincy.

Two years later, returning to seminary for my last quarter of classes, I went to the familiar book-lined office of my advising professor. When I asked him about the "serious doubts," he said he didn't recall that conversation of the faculty committee. He was a kind professor, and I liked him, but the biggest event of my life never made his radar screen.

For years I could not share this story without all my emotions of anger and frustration boiling over. I warned people I felt like an outdoor propane tank with the big lettering that warns, "No Flammables Within 100 Feet." More recently I've come to recognize this experience as the greatest gift I received at seminary, a taste of the edge. Without this experience I might never have

known life as an outsider. I might have stayed inside acceptable social categories.

If I had stayed within proper boundaries, I would have still trusted institutions, still assumed leadership will ultimately do the right thing, even if the process takes time. After seminary and after my forced marriage, I lost faith that organizations, even churches, will necessarily pursue justice.

With Jen driving us back to Montpelier, I think of how often we replace love with rules. Two men have to wait 50 years to make a formal declaration of their love. Greg has to sign up as an online minister to keep officiating unions. Danielle is stymied in her efforts to register as a woman. She and Sara end up with a certificate of marriage instead of a civil union.

I like Sara's approach. Heteroflexibility.

Chapter Six

Rip's Story

BACK IN MONTPELIER, after our time at Moose Meadow Lodge, Jen and I order lunch at a Mexican restaurant. The owner apologizes after our waiter brings a burrito instead of the chicken enchiladas I asked for. It starts our conversation.

"I wish you could come here tomorrow night. Every couple of weeks a group of cross-dressing men have dinner here. This is a safe place for them.

"The leader of their group once asked me if they should sit at the back of the restaurant. 'Right in the center,' I told him, no one here sits in a corner unless they choose to."

The owner walks away and while we eat our food, Jen says what I've been feeling, "We already have enough material for the whole documentary. And this is only the third day."

All this, and we still have a whole month of journey ahead. After the enchilada we find the Associated Press office to start the search for Civil Union footage Jen can use in her documentary.

Toby offers to photograph me while we're visiting. "I think Ross Sneyd will be interested in your ride. He covered the Civil Union process for us in 2000." An AP story is a big deal, but setting up this story feels so simple. I'd never expect an offer like this in New York City.

"That's Vermont," says Sara, when I get back and tell her how helpful I found AP." When the legislature was holding hearings about Civil Unions, people watched on television or listened on radio, and suddenly they realized they needed to be present for these hearings. People just got in their cars and started driving. Lots of people know their legislators personally. All that made a difference during the process."

We talk some more and Danielle confirms how legislators were surprised by the hatred they heard toward gay and lesbian people. "Even Howard Dean said this hateful language helped convince him Vermont needed the Civil Unions law."

It's late when everyone else goes to bed. I stay up two more hours, writing in my journal, sending e-mails out to the hundreds who are following this ride and offering encouragement. Tomorrow I ride southwest to Rutland. Sara has called ahead to arrange my next night's visit. Rip Jackson will host me.

"Before you head to Rutland," Jen tells me, I need shots of you riding by all these flags. We've got nothing like this in Seattle." It's 6:30 in the morning on Saturday and I have sixty miles ahead of me. We get the Montpelier footage Jen wants, American flags, a good photo of a river, the capitol building, even an old cemetery.

When I finally ride south from town, I look forward to this first day of hard physical work. People from all over the country have warned me about the Green Mountains and the White Mountains of Vermont. The cautions made a big enough impact that I even switched to longer cranks on my unicycle. I'm riding on five-inchers instead of my usual four-and-a-half.

Unicycles have no gears, so wheel diameter and crank length are the only ways to adjust speed. Also, because the pedals are

attached directly to the axle, I have no chain to allow for coasting. My 36-inch Coker wheel helps me get down the shoulder of the road, almost ten feet for every turn of the wheel, ten or eleven miles an hour. This wheel makes far better time than a standard twenty-inch unicycle. Five-inch cranks give me good torque for climbing. When I get out of Vermont, I'll switch back to the 4.5-inch length. Short cranks help the feet spin faster and allow a higher speed. They work everywhere except for steep hills.

The machinery of unicycling is part of the fun I have touring. I worked for a year on getting the perfect seat for my 50-state ride. An Iowa man who pedaled the world's fastest 100-meter dash suggested building a seat cover to hold a twelve-inch inner tube. The day I first taped that tube onto the seat, I knew I had a chance of traveling far by unicycle: Riding on air makes all the difference. One problem was the seat kept popping every hundred or so miles, rubbed to pieces from my body pounding on it all day long. I tried duct taping the tube, inflating it more, inflating it less. I tried thorn-proof tubes. They were too hard.

Knowing I couldn't ride without a comfortable seat, I happily bought new tubes every other day as I rode cross-country. Finally, though, two years later, unicycling my *One Wheel – Many Spokes* author tour from Vancouver, Canada to Tijuana, Mexico, I solved the seat problem. We'd had an extra piece of polar fleece at home, one of Anne's sewing projects for the winter. Wrapping the tube with the fleece, covering every exposed piece of rubber, and then swaddling the tube tightly with the material, I finally found success. Riding from Canada to Mexico, I got 1,000 miles out of my seat tube.

My other innovation is handlebars. Without them, unicycling uphill is like bicycling with no hands. No power. With handlebars, I've managed fourteen percent grades in Upstate New York and the Appalachians. Salvaged from a children's bike I found at the dump, the grips fit perfectly on the very first welding effort. I'd expected a lot of trial and error, but I've now balanced through dozens of windstorms and cranked over countless steep grades. People sometimes think I'm riding my unicycle backwards, because the handlebars are positioned behind me. I welded them

there to keep the front free for falls, the direction we unicyclists most often crash.

Near Mendon, Vermont.

Passing the hundred-mile mark of this journey, I feel my body adjusting to the rhythm of the ride. Every time I look at my loaded unicycle I feel satisfied, knowing it carries all my supplies for the trip. Every time I pull out pen and paper, I feel rich. I can stop anywhere, anytime, and dive into stories. Today, pedaling alongside the New England Central railroad track, sharing the route with a lazy river, the slopes remain gentle. Jen appears from around corners, filming riverbottom farmland, chest-high cornfields, dense forests, old barns and stone walls. I get nervous at

just one corner. Jen has spotted her first "Take Back Vermont" sign. These are remnants of the anti-gay effort back in 2000. Jen finds the sign painted on an old white barn, and she's stopped her rental car on a curve of the road, even as I hear the noisy approach of a car accelerating behind me. I pedal into the road lane, waving wildly to warn the car behind and shouting ahead at Jenn. She keeps filming, oblivious to the danger I sense. The car behind makes the stop. Jen pulls away. We're safe this time. I'm sensitive to safety. Every single car has to get around me on every single day if I'm going to complete this journey.

A dozen miles further down the road, we stop for breakfast in Northfield Center. The family outside the restaurant is vacationing from Detroit. They tell me a story about their high school, and how it posted signs last year, "Gay people are everyday people." The signs caused a commotion big enough for people to start writing editorials in the local newspaper. Inside, the waitress echoes the inclusive sentiments, but she warns that many people around town don't feel the same way. An hour further down the road, I arrive at East Braintree. Town names here are so directional. I've come through West Berlin, East Brookfield, and even South Northfield

"Guns and Groceries," reads the sign to this store. I stop for something to drink and a visit to the bathroom, the one marked "Need a Flatter Bladder Restroom." Near the gun rack, shelves hold woolen underwear and all sorts of outdoor gear.

Standing alongside the rifles, and paying for my soda, I take a breath of courage and commit to telling of my ride, asking my questions as gently as I can, "What's sentiment around here?"

Silence. I wait, my inner anxiety rising. Finally the man replies. "I'm just an old Vermonter." He moves his body only once, only to transfer my money to his till. Blue tanktop, large middle, armpits show from bare arms that rise up and lock behind his head.

"They're in our face. They've always been here, but they used to be quiet. Now no one is quiet anymore."

"Should Civil Unions have passed in 2000?"

After another silence Rifle Man answers, "No."

I tell him about the couple who lived together for fifty years and finally celebrated their civil union. He replies with a story about logging that was delayed because of a rare bat that turned out not to be anywhere near the land in question. We're talking now, even if our words go past one another.

I tell him about the rights which Greg and Willy listed from their civil union—visitation at hospitals, inheritance, state taxes—and the federal rights still denied—taxes, married status for insurance coverage, and a thousand more excluded privileges—"Should they have these rights?"

He answers me with a story about a judge who was approved for the court despite glaring deficiencies.

I tell about the two women with the three children—the mom telling me how their kids are the best-behaved children at church. "Always. We have to be, otherwise people will assume behavior problems mean two women can't parent children."

"Should these children enjoy the protection of a marriage for their two parents?"

He passes another story by me, "We've got too many outsiders moving in. Vermont is being overrun. A woman bought an acre of land and then posted no trespassing in a place where fishing had always happened. When a man came to fish she told him to get off her property."

"If you were a real Vermonter," she yelled at him, "you would leave my property when I ask you to."

"If you were a real Vermonter," he replied, "you wouldn't ask me to leave."

Rifle Man and I do our leaving on good terms, though he never answers a single question. Still, I feel thankful to stand next to a gun rack and find myself in a non-militant conversation. Trying to talk about homosexuality here, each question serves as a lightning rod for issues from real estate to gun ownership.

Back on the road, the shopkeeper's story of the woman and the fisherman makes me remember tandem bicycling in Norway. The country has a rule called, "All People's Right." The rule gives permission for campers to tent on private property; the landowner must yield to passing campers. In return the campers must respect the private land. I like the "All People's Right." It seems the same

as the gun shop owners fishing story. It sounds like a good civil union to me, providing for the needs of everyone. I wonder how many hours it would have taken at the gun rack for Rifle Man to share his thoughts on the connections.

Twice more on the way to Rip's home, I hear the chant, “Those gay people crammed this issue in our face.” I’m pedaling through Rutland County now, home of Take Back Vermont signs, and something new, this open displeasure with the civil union law.

Rutland, Vermont. With Rip.

When we arrive at Rip's home I ask him about the difference between Montpelier and here.

"There's not one gay group organized in Rutland."

"So why do you choose to live here?"

"Well, we've got a great music program at church. That's one reason, but the other is that I love the people here, and I love this countryside." He points outside to the five acres of woods that surround him, the only buffer being the lawn and gardens he tends. From his home no other buildings are visible.

"People here are real salt-of-the-earth," Rip continues. He doesn't seem to be looking for a perfect community to live in, just one where he can make a difference. "Prejudice," he tells us, "is mostly a matter of not being informed." Even as he prepares dinner for us, he educates us, "All organic. I'm big into organic food." He tells us which farmer's markets each of the ingredients comes from. As he chops and stirs, he tells a string of stories—genetics, society, religion, relationships, and his experiences with counseling.

Rip has strong arms; his black hair is cut close and perfect. He seems a dozen years younger than his forty years. When I ask about the "in-our-face" complaint people made today about LGBT people, he replies immediately.

"Jesus was 'in-your-face.' I'm not a Bible thumper, but I do believe in the radical teaching of Jesus...As a kid growing up in Atlanta, I knew Coretta Scott King and I got to hear her speak often. She taught me to avoid becoming the hate I was trying to overcome...When I talk with people I tell them: When others are suffering, it's not okay to ask suffering people to sit back and wait until you get comfortable."

He tells about his most recent project with his church. "We were just in Africa, working at an orphanage with orphans of AIDS victims. It's not okay for us to just watch without trying to help out with the suffering and discrimination, wherever it's happening. Sitting back would not be Christian."

Rip has such charisma, such an open personality. I ask, "Have you ever been the subject of violence?"

"Yes. I have. I've been beaten up in school as a kid, and I've had beer bottles thrown at me by thugs.

"I know I'm comfortable with my feminine side as well as my masculine side, and I'm fine with that. I catch some flak for it, but I have a lot to offer because I can appreciate a bigger picture."

Rip moves on to tell of youth here in Rutland, and the things he does to care for them. Together with others in the community, they plan to start a support group for those with nowhere else to turn.

I like this guy a lot. Jen films and films, including a classical piano concert Rip plays just for us. Later Jen drives off to pick up Tan from the airport. The two of them will be tag-teaming most of my trip, juggling their other full-time jobs with this documentary. Rip and I, sitting on couches in his living room, talk on. His cat Edina is curled in my lap. Patsy purrs from the floor.

"Why are straight men threatened by gay men?" Rip asks, "Lesbian women don't threaten men nearly as much."

"I don't know," I answer. "Do you think we're all scared maybe we could be gay?"

"What would be wrong with being gay?" Rip asks.

"You say that as a gay person. But for a straight man who was raised believing gay equals bad, the possibility of being gay would be terrible."

"My last lover," Rip tells me, "he was a heterosexual man until we met. Now he dates exclusively men."

I feel at ease with Rip. He tells me I'm an attractive man. He seems easy with himself. I talk to him about my identity as heterosexual.

"I've tried to imagine myself as gay," I tell Rip. "But I'm pretty sure I'm heterosexual. I've tried imagining a physical attraction to men, but it always comes back to women."

"It could be," answers Rip. "It could also be that our culture is so heterosexually biased you've never had a chance to explore your range of attraction."

Rip continues. "I've had a few girlfriends. I really liked them. They were wonderful, but I never had the same sexual attraction for women as for men. Men, they're really something."

"You're reminding me of my childhood," I reply. "I can tell you right now the names of girls that I had crushes on as a kid;

Virginia Ortiz in third grade, Sandy Tinderos in 5th grade, and Lorraine Ellesage in junior high."

"And I can tell you the names of every boy I had a crush on as a kid. If you can look back and understand how natural your girl crushes were to you, then you can know how my boy crushes made me feel. Attraction to men feels as natural for me as your turning toward women."

Talking with Rip, this all makes perfect sense, much better than the reading I did in a book that praises Exodus and the organizations that claim to make homosexual people heterosexual. Like too many others, that author kept reminding readers to love the sinner, but hate the sin. Homosexual people end up sounding like projects to be fixed. The author even warns against using homosexual experience as our guide, instead of the words of Scripture.

Why does that author so badly want Rip to be heterosexual? Why can't that author trust this story I'm hearing right now, trust Rip's Christian faith, trust him with his sexuality?

Rip's back and forth with me about attraction and sex feels non-threatening, even exciting. I start looking back into my past, wondering at how I've become myself. Conversations like this could easily feel invasive, topics I'd just as soon avoid, subjects still unresolved. But I'm comfortable here with Rip, and as I remember the names of my childhood crushes, I also remember how I spent my growing-up years in grinding shyness. I hardly dared a word with Virginia, Sandy, and Lorraine, fantasies inside my mind. No wonder we prefer to leave our past alone, like the man I met who told me, with surprising honesty, "I don't think, I run on instinct."

Maybe that's where the anti-gay author is coming from too, cautioning against listening to homosexual experience. Sitting here, as the evening sky fades into darkness, I tell Rip, "People who exclude gay people from their lives seem like the ones who are missing out."

"We have a lot to offer. We can help our culture rethink gender identity and gender roles. Part of our gift comes from growing up on the edge of society. We can see more clearly from the edge."

Maybe the extreme shyness of my youth was my own edge. Maybe it was my parents being immigrants, or maybe my parents not getting along. I don't really know where it comes from, but the edge of life makes sense to me. Rip feels like a kindred spirit.

He has already told me how he came out young, and how his parents supported him, and how he went to a good school. Now he tells me of a teacher who mentored him in music, and gave him his love for gourmet cooking, and opened his life to appreciating the beauty of this world.

"She was everything to me."

Recently he'd written to let her know another of her former students, a lesbian, had recently had a baby. The teacher had written back to Rip with devastating simplicity.

"As a Christian, I don't believe that's right."

"I'm really struggling," Rip tells me. "What happened to my teacher? She was so affirming of us students when we were growing up and taking classes from her. I owe her so much. So many others feel the same way. Her letter is a complete shock. I don't know how I'll talk to her or what I'll say next time I see her. What a disappointment."

"Like a parent who throws out their child when they discover they're gay?"

Silence from Rip. Tears begin to form.

It's common to hear of people who are against homosexuality, like the author who has come to mind this evening, and the person who painted Rip's house. Rip has already told me of overhearing the painter making jokes about the fag he'd been painting for. Rip confronted him. It's part of who Rip is, and this makes the words of his favorite teacher even harder.

It's rare to hear of open and affirming people who later turn against inclusion. When the person is one who shaped your identity, and gave you the courage to stand tall in the world, that's a whole different scene.

Rip tells of what an inspiration this teacher has been for his life, and the conflict this is causing him. Every person faces these relationship dilemmas. For a gay person the challenge is part of daily fare, figuring out who to risk trusting. Listening to Rip, I

hear the pain, the shock of this betrayal. It's one more journey he'll have to navigate because he's gay.

Our conversation tonight doesn't solve anything, but the words we've shared enlarge my life with their mix of things hopeful and hurtful. I could stay up all night talking, but Rip has a discipline of sleep, especially before his Sunday morning work.

When I lay down, I too fall asleep quickly. Fifty-one miles of riding, and all the conversation, have me ready for a rest. Rip wakes early to drive in and get music ready for worship. I sleep later, get up and write notes, and then pedal the dozen miles back into Rutland in time for worship.

Chapter Seven

Talking at the Biblical Divide

TAN ARRIVES to help Jen with the filming. She's as short as Jen. Both of them have Asian features, Jen a mixture of Spanish and Filipino, Tan a childhood immigrant from Vietnam. Instead of Jen's longer hair, Tan has hers cut short. As Jen says, "She's got the lesbian look."

Here at church Tan works from the balcony, filming the choir, the congregation, and the pastor preaching. The pastor offers words of LGBT inclusion from the pulpit. I sense some newness at the project as he says of gay and lesbian people that "we" have to love "those people too." Insiders and outsiders. Maybe three hundred people are worshiping this morning. I'd bet lots of money that some of "those people" are "these people," especially at a United Church of Christ congregation in a conservative city.

When I'm invited to speak during the announcements, I pedal my unicycle up the center aisle to a chorus of "ooh's" and "ahh's". Taking the microphone, I share that the purpose of my ride is to gather LGBT stories, and I'm traveling day by day with my destinations evolving along the way.

Rutland, Vermont. Grace Congregational UCC.

A dozen people gather at the back of church as soon as worship ends. Sylvia, dressed in black Sunday finery, actually kneels in front of One Wheel. Then she silently lays hands on it. We all stop to watch her. No words. No story behind this story she offers for us all to see. She stands and blesses me for the ride, hands me twenty dollars. No one ever laid hands on my unicycle before.

"Will you sign my tire?" I ask. She writes on my tire, then departs, leaving us with a vision.

Another woman says she saw me unicycling on the road to church this morning. "Sure it was me?" I tease.

"Oh, yes, your long hair was blowing along behind you."

"Ah, the hair. Should I cut it or keep it?"

"Keep it," she tells me. "For sure."

A lesbian couple offers hugs, thanks me for my ride and wishes me good places to stay along the way. A grandma arrives with a question. "Do you think LGBT rights is a civil rights issue?"

"I do."

"My grandson just completed high school. This spring he announced to his parents he's gay. I've been learning everything I can."

Activated by personal experience—Grandma is just like most people and me. I keep wanting "love your neighbor," and "liberty and justice for all" to be enough to charge everyone toward full inclusion, but for most of us, personal experience is required. Grandma's heard the sermons about loving others and sat at Independence Day celebrations her whole life long. Only now, after all these years, does the experience of her grandson call her to action. She hurts deeply from what she's discovering.

"Thank you for your ride," she tells me, wishing me a good journey.

Standing at the back of these dozen people is a man ten years younger than I am, waiting his turn. He seems hesitant. "You said you want to talk to people of every opinion. Well, I guess I represent the other side of this."

Mark is a high-school band teacher. A few minutes later, he and I find seats in an empty Sunday-school room. Steve has also come with us. He's just graduated from high school. Steve has already told us he's gay.

Mark starts uncertainly, looking at me as he speaks, watching for my reactions, "My views are shaped by reading the Bible," he begins. "I believe everyone should be treated with respect, but I believe the Bible tells us homosexuality is wrong."

As we talk back and forth I realize Mark really is open to this conversation. He's saying the words of the anti-gay author I'd been thinking about at Rip's last night, but here we are together, doing our best to talk.

I choose my words carefully. "How do you deal with the weight of scripture focusing on love for outsiders, while only six verses in the whole scripture even talk about homosexuality?"

"You can't dismiss those verses," he replies. Mark keeps circling to the six verses as a kind of anchor.

"What if," I push gently, "what if we take every verse in scripture as seriously as you want to take these six verses about homosexuality? What about the verses on hair-length. According to those, you're not supposed to cut your hair or your beard. That would mean I'm following scripture and you're not." I touch my hand to my head and flip a strand of hair.

We laugh together, and I continue. "Why do we think we're supposed to take the scriptures literally, and then we pick and choose which we want to emphasize?"

I give Mark more examples. "There are verses about not eating shellfish, and not eating pork, and not mixing two kinds of fabric together into the same material. We don't worry about those. Over in Maine, we even have lobster festivals. Back in Washington we have mussel festivals and clam chowder contests. Almost everyone wears cotton socks blended with synthetic stretch material."

"I don't know," he says. "Maybe I need to grow my hair out." He switches the conversation to procreation as the reason for sex, as a reason against homosexuality.

"Okay, but does everyone have to procreate?" I ask. "Isn't it enough if we've got ninety percent of the population being heterosexual? We already have over six billion people on our planet."

When Mark starts talking about his libertarian politics, the newly graduated Steve jumps into the conversation to echo Mark. "Yeah, government and religion shouldn't be making the rules about homosexuality."

"They're already making the rules," I answer Steve. "The federal government is already prohibiting marriage, and churches are already making rules either to include or exclude LGBT people."

"That's one of the problems. We have judges making the laws instead of the legislature."

"Do you want the federal government to repeal all its existing rules about marriage?" I ask.

Steve doesn't answer. Instead he begins telling his story. Steve says he knew he was gay by the age of eleven, back in the sixth grade. Like a lot of other gay people, he told no one. Different from most, though, Steve made a long-range plan. For the next six years he worked every day to build a network of people who knew Steve just as Steve. "I didn't want people to judge me for being gay or straight. I wanted them to get to know me as a person before they found out I'm gay."

"You mean," I ask, eyes arching, "in sixth grade you made this plan?"

"That's what I did," Steve confirms. "And every day I worked so people could know who I am and understand what I believe. When I came out this spring before graduation, I planned it so if people wanted to judge me for being gay, they'd already know me as a person first."

"How's your project going?"

"People are accepting me," Steve tells me.

"I can't believe you had this plan for all these years. If you'd put your energy on starting a new business, you could have started another Microsoft corporation by now."

"That would have been easier," Steve laughs. "But it's actually easier being gay than being Republican in Vermont."

I ask more about Steve's politics. "Don't you see any influence of Civil Rights laws or advocacy work for LGBT people having made society better for you today? There was a time when you could get arrested for holding hands with a man in public. Now you can have a civil union if you want."

Steve stays adamant in dismissing the roles of government and church. His reasons don't line up with my own reading of history, but they do match his individual approach to coming out.

When we get to the end of our discussion Mark thanks me for our time together. "It was good to have a real discussion. I usually feel dismissed when I talk about this topic with friends, so mostly I keep quiet. Thanks."

This is what I'm looking for. Bridges. I'm looking for the way across with strangers, just as I'm still looking for the way with my Dad. The process takes so much energy, hearing things that make little sense to me, knowing the words I speak don't add up for others, and then continuing to try to talk together.

Two friends have walked into the room during my last exchanges with Mark and Steve. As soon as I can, I walk over to give big hugs to Keith and Vicki Cash. They hosted my family and me on our fifty-state ride, when we came through Schenectady, New York. Keith is another cross-country unicyclist. In 1981, back when he was 23, he pedaled from Los Angeles to Boston.

We cross-country unicyclists are rare. Maybe half-a-dozen of us have made the coast-to-coast trek. Keith and I formed an instant friendship. Now he and Vicki have driven three hours so we can see each other again. After all the conversations of this day, their familiar faces bring refreshment.

"People are people," Keith says, when we start talking about my ride. "What's the big deal?"

"Shouldn't we be thankful," says Vicki, "when two people love each other? Isn't that something to celebrate in our world?"

Keith is one of my biggest supporters. Ever since he first learned of my cross-country plans four years ago, he has offered encouragement. Today he helps me connect with the unicycling part of riding Straight Into Gay America. "The unicycle is perfect for meeting people," he confirms. "Everyone loves a unicycle." Keith has stories of people literally saving his life as he pedaled across the country. Crossing the Mojave Desert at the beginning of his tour, he tells how hard it was to get water.

"Trains still had cabooses then. Day after day I watched those trains going by. One day I met an engineer who told me the trains were looking out for me, watching this crazy guy unicycling through the desert."

"Why don't you signal us for water?" the engineer had asked him.

"What a surprise. He showed me how to signal the engineer, and how the engineer would call back to the caboose and they would throw water bags to me. It worked. The first time they

threw water it was like manna from heaven. After that I never went thirsty again.

Keith gets wistful every time we visit about unicycling. "What a great way to meet people. I still remember all the hotels where people gave me room to stay and all the people who took me in to their homes." Keith understands the magic of the open road and the gift vulnerability returns to the traveler.

"But I never rode fast like you. Thirty miles was the longest day I ever did on Betsy." Keith's unicycle had just a twenty-four-inch wheel.

Telling Keith and Vicki about my visits so far, I share how natural it feels for me to be overnighting with a gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgendered person. "It's no different than visiting a straight person or straight family. Queer feels normal."

"It's the unicycle," Keith laughs. "What's more queer than unicycling? We're just a couple of queer guys." Keith laughs. "That's us."

I laugh, too, but I know the motivation behind Keith's ride; the struggle, the queerness of his own journey. With big dreams and little money, Keith had gone to Hollywood as a young man. He loved acting, and he auditioned time after time for parts. I listen as he tells the story again to Jen and Tan, "I was so bad that not only did I never get a role, but everyone who auditioned with me never got a part either." All alone, confronting barriers he could not cross, he grew deeply discouraged and desperately broke.

"I didn't get the idea of unicycling as some kind of great adventure. No, I figured I was just going to get on that unicycle and head into the desert and fade into my tears. And to make sure I would not succeed, I was determined to pedal backwards."

Keith still adds laughter to his sentences, but I hear the passion in his voice. "A friend of mine finally talked me out of riding backwards. Another friend welded up a big set of handlebars I could strap my gear onto; forty pounds of stuff, even a cook stove. I brought along all the money I had. Three hundred dollars.

"My life changed forever because of that ride. Instead of dying, I came alive. After a few days on the road my whole life turned around. I started feeling like the luckiest guy in the world.

And I got this feeling – I just knew I was going to make it all the way across the country. And I started loving that ride, even with the terribly painful seat and all the challenges. I was free, and I knew it. Those were the best weeks of my life."

Keith was 23 when he made his crossing from Los Angeles to Boston. I was 26 when I first solo bicycled across the United States. My start and finish cities were the same as Keith's. Both of us were overwhelmed by the hospitality we discovered. Both of us felt our sense of wonder grow and deepen as we crossed the country by our own power. When Keith talks about the best weeks of his life, and how his life changed forever, I know what he means. After I finished crossing the country, my goal was to keep living in the spirit of the ride.

As we eat our lunch together, Keith gives me a voice recorder he's brought along. So far, I've been stopping on the roadside whenever I have thoughts for my journal. From now on I can hang the recorder around my neck and tape reflections while I ride. The little gadget weighs just a couple ounces, but it can hold 37 hours of voice recording.

Outside the restaurant I help Keith get on One Wheel, a challenge since my legs are longer than his. Compared to the almost ten feet I make for every pedal revolution, Keith made less than six on his small wheel. Every time he sees my unicycle I know he dreams of touring on this wheel. As we stand together saying our goodbyes he says to me again, "Wouldn't it be great if everyone could experience what you get from a unicycle tour?"

Next for the afternoon is a ride in Jen and Tan's car. As much as I want to pedal every mile of my route, I've agreed to drive with them to Northhampton, Massachusetts. Both of them want to film in Massachusetts, where gay marriage was approved one year ago. My pace would get me there in two days, but that's not good enough. Jen flies back to Seattle tomorrow, for a week of catching up at work. Tan will stay only until Tuesday. After that I'll be on my own for the rest of the week, riding completely solo, working my way deeper into this ride.

Chapter Eight

Street Smart

SQUEEZED IN the backseat with my unicycle, I get a view of Tan and Jen's perspective on this ride, constantly driving and searching for the next shot. At a covered bridge we bail out for video of me riding back and forth across the river. We're a team doing this ride, and this afternoon in the car is proof. This ride is about far more than my unicycle. Jen and Tan have as much invested in this project as I do, more if one counts their identity as lesbian, and their previous documentary, *Not Straightforward*. If they capture this tour well, they'll have useful stories, the everyday events that make up life beyond the polarization of religion and politics.

I'll still try to unicycle 1,000 miles, even with this break in the route. I still love goals and challenges. I've told Jen and Tan about riding every pedal through the fifty states. Except for three river crossings that required me to take rides across bridges, I pedaled every piece of asphalt on that journey. On hills that were too steep, I'd fall off trying, catch my breath, then get back on until I reached the summit. Many of those hills were so steep I couldn't mount the unicycle while facing uphill. I had to start out riding

back downhill; then, when I got balanced, I could turn around on the road and pedal back into the challenge.

"It was Guinness World Record fundamentalism," I joke with Tan and Jen.

"First you tell them what you're going to do. Then you tell them who's going to verify your attempt. Finally you go do it. Then you get judged. If you pass every step, you get into Guinness heaven. Life according to a rule book."

Riding for the Guinness record three years ago I also set the mark for the farthest distance traveled in 24 hours: 202.8 miles. The record lasted until Ken Looi broke my record in New Zealand, riding 230 miles. I wrote to congratulate him and told him not to worry about me trying to recapture that record. Once was enough.

Woodstock, Vermont.

Arriving in North Hampton, we still don't know where we'll sleep. Back in Rutland, the grandmother I'd spoken to at church had volunteered to call family and friends. So far no messages from anyone with floor space.

Time magazine labeled North Hampton "The Lesbian Capital of America." On our first slow pass through Main Street we do see all sorts of couples together. Most are women, but if people don't look for LGBT evidence, they probably won't see North Hampton as different from many other progressive college towns. Smith College's campus is here.

We circle town twice; still no word of a place to stay. A motel would solve the problem. We saw plenty back at the interstate exit. But I would like this string of visits to continue. I call back to Rutland to see if Nancy has had any luck contacting her niece, Kate. "We left a message," Nancy tells me, "but no one was home." She gives me the phone number and invites me to call them. "I'm sure they'd love to meet you."

Kate's husband, Fran, answers the phone after two rings. I make an awkward introduction. He tells me their family has been away all day playing at a lake. "You want a place to stay tonight?" he asks.

"Well, we're hoping to find a place…but…you just got..."

"Come on over. You're welcome here. Let me give you directions."

Fifteen minutes later we're introducing ourselves to Fran, Kate, and their four-year-old Nathan. Tan starts playing with him, and Nathan is soon showing off, running, grinning, and screeching for Tan's attention. Kate's a teacher. Fran works as a homebuilder. They're getting this house ready to sell in a week. "Too big for us. We're downsizing, going to live a simpler life."

When Kate hears I live with my family at Holden Village, she wants to know all about our family and our experience of community living. When we get around to talking about LGBT stories, we hear about Fran and Kate's open generosity.

"Six of our neighbors are gay or lesbian. Two lesbian families live over there." He points across their yard. "A gay couple lives over there." He points the other direction. "One of those guys is a

real comedian, really fun. They're all just people to us. No different.

"I'll tell you this," he adds, "Gay and lesbian people are good for the economy here.

"People were real smart when they moved here. Early on gay and lesbian people bought property. If you have property, you have influence. Homes. Businesses. Gay people are part of the community structure. Our mayor is lesbian."

By 9:00 p.m., everyone feels tired, Nathan from his day at the lakeshore, we from another day on the road. Jen and Tan expect little action on a Sunday night in North Hampton. They opt for sleep instead of joining me for a downtown walk.

On my second lap of Main Street I pass the same group of four people. Three of them sit on a street-side bench next to an Asian Restaurant. The other sits with her dog on the sidewalk. Each has a backpack of the same greasy color. Dressed in dirty camouflage with ripped-off sleeves, showers seem a distant memory in their lives. Their aroma wafts across the full distance of the wide sidewalk.

They return my hello. I left my unicycle at Fran's house, so I tell them a few words about my ride and my destination of Baltimore. When we start talking I pull a white plastic chair over from the outdoor coffee shop next door to the Asian Restaurant.

"Everyone has a fucking right to be who they are." Sidewalk girl starts her commentary on LGBT people.

"But who the fuck wants rights in this society? I mean, I believe in activists and everything, but God, gay people are trying to get into the military. What's fucking up with that?"

The others laugh. Sidewalk Girl, maybe thirty years old, does most of the talking. I'm sitting closest to Beauty Queen, covered in tattoos and body piercings. Between them sit two men, late twenties or early thirties, one large, the other not.

Big Man tells me, "We live on trains." For awhile they tell me how to catch rides and the places they've traveled. Little Man is engaged in the travel talk, mostly nodding or adding a "fuck yes" or a "fuck no." They pass a water bottle filled with amber wine. They keep a cigarette lit, passing it around their circle. I soak in

the adventure and the rage, listening to the poetry of their language.

"We live on the fucking waste of this society, begging and scavenging," says Sidewalk Girl. "Someday everyone is going to wake up, and this whole fucking nation will have fallen apart. In 24 hours, people will all panic. But us, we know how to fucking survive."

"We so fucking do," agrees Beauty Queen.

Somehow I mention religion as we turn back to their thoughts about LGBT rights.

"Don't get me started on fucking religion. That's my second biggest hatred."

"What's the biggest?"

"Fucking cops. I fucking hate cops."

Sidewalk Girl speaks again. She's already told me about living on the street and keeping a vegan diet—no meat, no dairy, no eggs, no cheese. How, I wonder, does a person manage vegan while living on society's throw-aways?

"I finally gave it up. I mean, what does a fucking cow mean when this whole world is so fucked up?" A moment earlier she had scored a Chinese takeout box from the trash outside the Asian Restaurant, and then yelled a loud rant when she discovered the leftovers had been used as a butt tray.

"Being human," she continues, "that's the fucking problem. I don't try to be fucking gay or lesbian or transgender or straight. I try to live androgynous."

Beauty Queen tells me about other friends who want to get rid of male and female descriptions. "Some of my friends quit saying 'he' or 'she.' Like some guy you see, you say hey 'look at Zee' or 'look at Co.'"

"What?"

"Co or Zee instead of him or her."

"I had a sweetie for a year," Sidewalk Girl begins again, "But her parents thought I was fucking Satan. They came and jammed her into their fucking car and ripped us away from each other. Gay doesn't matter. Class, that's what fucking matters. That's what made me fucking Satan to her parents."

Little Man and Beauty Queen grab onto Sidewalk's thought, talking about greed, and people living in houses to protect them from the world, and people living lives of mind-numbing routine. "If people want to live a meaningless fucking 40-hour-a-week life and die a meaningless fucking death, let them."

Sidewalk Girl adds, "I'll probably be dead in a couple of years; my life is brutal. I don't fucking care. I'm probably the most pessimistic person in the world. All I want is to die with a needle in my arm or a bottle in my hand, so I don't have to fucking feel my dying."

Big Man has been talking to his father on my cell phone, "You have free minutes on Sundays?" he'd asked. After he's done Beauty Queen calls a friend.

"If you really think about this world, if you see how people are treated, and what's happening to our world, this is a messed up fucking world." Little Man sums up our hour-and-a-half together.

"That's why I unicycle," I respond. These four, aroma and all, have captured me. Their lifestyle is not mine. Their language and their poetry come out different. But we hold some similar perspectives.

I confess to these companions, "A lot of the time I feel like nothing I do will ever make a difference, the forces are too big. I don't know if my ride matters to the world. I keep having to trust the stories, even though I can't control the words."

I tell them about riding through all fifty states three years ago.

"That's so fucking cool," says Little Man, and the four of them tell me more about their own travels. It's a different world than my own—in some ways—in other ways these are the closest companions I have met on this journey.

The Asian Restaurant has closed, so has the coffee shop. Our only light comes from the street lamp above us. After goodbyes I walk a half-block then turn around and go back.

"Can I take your picture?"

"You can, but I don't want it showing up somewhere on the fucking Internet," says Sidewalk Girl. I click four shots, and then

we all look at the digital screen to see the pictures of this beautiful evening with beautiful people.

Beauty Queen asks if I'll send her a copy. "I'll give you my e-mail address."

She writes it down for me—for all the societal outcast talk, her address is still at Yahoo.

Then it's home to Fran's to sleep. The house is dark when I return. I find a mattress on the floor.

Next afternoon, unicycling toward Springfield, language changes. "The damn liberals are killing this country," spits the security guard at Providence Hospital.

I've gotten up from a nap on my way to Springfield, having enjoyed the shade of a large maple tree on the lawn of Providence Hospital. A security van has pulled up next to me.

"You all right?" asks the guard in the passenger seat.

"Yes."

"What is that thing?" asks the driver.

"A unicycle."

"What are you doing here?" The driver is a short, squat man.

"Unicycling from Burlington to Baltimore." I watch his amazement. He turns off the engine and the two men step out to question me further.

"I'm collecting stories about gay and lesbian life in the United States today," I tell them. "Anything to share?"

The passenger shakes his head, "Not a thing. I'm not political. I don't vote." He is a tall man without a chin. He appears to be in his fifties.

"What about you?" I ask the driver. He's older, looking near retirement. His face is red like mine.

"Nothing to say," but something in his voice betrays his dismissal. I follow up and ask what he thinks about the marriage law passed last year in Massachusetts.

"One man and one woman. Homosexuals shouldn't marry. That's biblical."

North Hampton, Massachusetts. Smith College.

And then he starts his politics. "Gays are everywhere now, all over the media. They're in everyone's face." For fifteen minutes I listen to this security guard, venting with loud emotion, his face color heading toward burgundy. Topics covered:

Damn Democrats—who never allow a real discussion of the issues. Just one damn side to them.

Damn Liberal Media—who never show both sides of the story. I used to vote Democrat, but I'll never do that again in my life.

Damn War Protestors—who don't respect our soldiers.
My brother got no respect after Vietnam.

Damn University Professors—roper, doper,
diaper liberal professors, teaching communism.

Damn Immigrants— bringing drugs into this country. We're losing our country to foreigners.

Damn Welfare—people don't have to work anymore. We need to get rid of welfare, make people work.

Damn Kennedy Family—they're the worst part of living in Massachusetts.

Standing with these two men, asking questions and listening, I tell the venting guard about Greg and Willie from the Moose Meadow Lodge and the list of rights they now enjoy because of their civil union. "Should they," I ask Burgundy Face, "have the right to visit each other in the hospital, have the right to pass on their inheritance like a couple in a heterosexual marriage?"

With what he's said so far, I expect my question will push Burgundy Face toward deeper shades of purple. Instead, he shocks me.

"Yes," he says, starting to turn beautiful like my four friends from the sidewalk last night.

I mention how Willy told me of 1,138 federal laws that benefit married men and women, which gay or lesbian couples don't have access to. I ask if gay and lesbian people should have these rights, too.

"Yes," he says again, "I just don't want them dominating the media. I don't want them getting in the way of my life. If they don't bother me, I won't bother them."

"Thanks," I say. "Thanks for your story." A moment later I'm pedaling away, trying to understand these words I've heard. Hatred spewing from every orifice of his body, this disgruntled guard still has a "yes" in him for equal rights.

"Imagine the whole state of Vermont having the intensity of conversation you're telling me about," says David Moats. I'm filling him in on Burgundy Man. "Imagine that lasting four months, and you'll have a sense of the process for approving Civil Unions in 2000."

Another day on the road.

David talks to me by phone. I've pulled off the road to visit with him, notebook in hand. A dozen people in Vermont suggested I speak with him. An editorial reporter in Rutland, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his work covering the Civil Union debate.

"This is the biggest issue of our time," he begins. "I knew this would be the biggest story our paper ever covered. When the court ruling came, I looked at it and realized we needed to speak

immediately and not sit on the fence. We wrote an editorial in support of the court's ruling."

David wrote during the four months of the legislative process, two or three editorials a week. "I focused on the people in the middle and the way they dealt with the issues. These were the people who had the possibility of changing their minds, one way or the other."

"And some people did change their minds." David tells of two legislators who came to understand their need to vote for civil unions. "They changed their positions, even knowing they would lose their elected offices at the next election. And they were right. They did lose their elections. But they were at peace. Some of them have told me this was the most incredible learning experience of their careers. They've told me they have no regrets."

David pauses, "Those were real profiles in courage." After the Pulitzer Prize award for the newspaper, he wrote *Civil Wars: A Battle for Gay Marriage.* "I tried to follow the stories of some of these remarkable people involved in the process. One of the legislators had a dairy farm and milked cows for a living. Another had served as a state trooper."

As we finish talking, David shares his opinion that the wisdom of the process, the wisdom of the Vermont court, was to allow the state a number of alternatives to work with. Rather than legislating a solution, the court simply reported current laws were unconstitutional and turned the process over to the legislature.

Massachusetts has chosen differently from Vermont. Here the court ruled the old laws unconstitutional, and also said more: the only equal remedy is granting marriage. After a year of gay marriages in Massachusetts, people wonder whether the constitution will hold or will be changed to ban gay marriage.

With David's words ringing in my ears, I return my notebook to my pack and start pedaling more miles. "Biggest issue of our times," David says. When I grew up as a kid in the 1960's, the biggest issues of my first years were Vietnam and Civil Rights. I had my own personal view of black/white relations because of the church I was raised in. All week long I lived in Canoga Park, in a growing white suburban community of Los Angeles. On Sunday mornings we'd drive 26 miles on LA freeways to our Danish im-

migrant Lutheran Church at 43rd Street and 3rd Avenue, just a few miles from Watts, in the heart of African-American neighborhoods. When the nation viewed the 1991 beating of Rodney King and the subsequent Los Angeles Riots on television, I was looking at my Sunday morning neighborhood.

Really, it was never our neighborhood: It was our Danish-culture outpost. Ethnic food, language flying in native Danish or thickly-accented English; I remember cigarette smoke so thick it blurred the social hall when we packed in for the once-a-month Danish language worship, Danish meal, Danish singing, and Danish program.

I remember, too, how every year or so a single black person or an entire black family would come to our Sunday morning English-language worship. I was young then, but my memory from one time is of a family standing on the church steps after worship and no one from our congregation talking with them. Despite nearly paralyzing shyness, I recall walking up those steps to shake their hands, and to greet them, of doing this all alone, trying to fill a void. They never returned.

I won't vouch for any other details of this memory, but I can confirm conversations I overheard at our outpost. The dad of one of my childhood friends spoke Danish-hued words about refusing to eat at black-operated restaurants. "They're always dirty. Their service is slow. Their standards are low." An older man insisted of black people, "We have our place. They have theirs." He'd immigrated to the United States some thirty years before, but he spoke with a harsh confidence about who belonged where.

I can't say these issues dominated my growing up. Mostly after worship I rushed to the Sunday School room to sharpen ping-pong skills with my brother Karl and with friends David and Linda and Karen and Gerda. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death in 1968 did not turn my six-year-old life upside down.

Not until I grew up did I start reading the speeches of King, learning about the long process of equal rights in this country for slaves, and then for the time after slavery, and for women and immigrants. Not until leaving the Air Force Academy in 1981 did I start studying and questioning the deep tradi-

tion of war within our country. Not until bicycling across the United States in 1987 did I start looking more carefully at the genocide against native people that marks the conquest of this continent. All of this came after growing up and leaving my childhood church.

Moving on from my childhood church helped me learn about civil rights, but it also helped me better appreciate those Danes I grew up with. Most of them gave enormous energy to pulling up roots as young men and women to move from a country whose entire population was far less than the number of people living in their city of Los Angeles. Their life efforts focused more on becoming part of the American order than on questioning the problems. Their goal was to succeed in this land, not to change it. What they wanted from church was a place for remembering roots.

I often wonder what would have happened if my Danish elders had been a little more settled in this new land. Might they have claimed their justice roots more strongly? Their tradition includes one of the great church leaders of the 19th century, Nikolai Grundtvig. He was passionately involved in the reform of everything from education to peasant's rights. His qualifying sermon challenged the status quo church of his time: "Why has the Word of the Lord Disappeared from His House?" Later in life his push for change took him all the way to the Danish Parliament where he helped draft a new constitution for Denmark. Status quo was never good enough for Grundtvig.

"Biggest issue of our times," David said of the Civil Union process in Vermont. Times change, topics change, countries change, but the process toward equal rights continues. The questions remain the same. How will we deal with difference? How will we build bigger circles of acceptance?

When I remember the issues of my youth, and the Danes of my Danish Church, I recognize they are part of me and I am part of them, even when our paths have grown apart. Connie and Niels, Helene and Kris, Rigmor, they still want to know how I'm doing, even when what I do seems strange to them.

People I meet on the road want to know what I'm riding for too. The surprising thing about pedaling a unicycle for equal rights is how people love the strangeness of me riding One Wheel.

Even if they struggle with LGBT difference or other kinds of difference, my One Wheel difference brings celebration instead of division.

David Moats helps me feel I'm on the right track as I try to gather everyday stories. With each passing day I appreciate One Wheel more. An hour after talking with David, I stop at a convenience store and another conversation starts. "Wow," says the man who watches me dismount. "That's a big wheel!" When he finds out I'm trying to ride 1,000 miles he tells me he once bicycled across the country. "When I was younger. Missouri to the East Coast. I met a lot of nice people." Now he's hefting more than three hundred pounds from the bench when he stands, but he remembers how good he felt about himself during that ride.

"One of the best things I've ever done." He's still wistful, more interested in talking travel than LGBT rights. Rights are no big deal to him. "The younger generation gets it. I'm the youngest of seven kids in my family. My siblings aren't accepting, but all their kids are. Gay rights are just a matter of time."

Later in the afternoon I get to meet Kelly. Near Springfield she sprints across a parking lot toward me with the grace of an Olympic athlete. "Keep riding. I'll run alongside. I just have a question." Instead I jump off and spend twenty minutes answering questions about her own dream of bicycling cross-country.

"When?" I ask.

"Oh, next summer, for sure."

For sure. I believe her. These dreams, these feel like the best times of our lives.

Crossing the Connecticut River, I pedal into Springfield, Massachusetts, the biggest city of the tour so far. The neat shops of small towns give way here to potholed pavement, dirty sidewalks, crowded buildings. High-class property on one block contrasts with broken-down brickwork just a few minutes further on. Four in the afternoon, once again I have no place to stay. Tan has called from the airport where she dropped Jen off. She'll arrive sometime this evening. Earlier I telephoned the PFLAG (Parents, Families

and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) organization in town, but got only a message machine.

Willie on the street is bare-chested in this 85-degree weather. Silver rings pierce his nipples. He stops me in the middle of downtown as I ride by. Twenty or so, tall, quick talking, he laughs when I tell him about my ride. "I respect gay people. But I *love* lesbians." Then he tells me about the dream for him and his wife to move to Florida and start a restaurant. "I want to try a mix between Asian and Mexican."

For a few hours I take refuge in air-conditioned relief at the library, using a computer to write my journal, and send news to the growing numbers of people who are e-mailing to comment on my ride.

A librarian catches me on the way out. "I checked all the rules. No bikes allowed in the library." I've parked One Wheel in a corner behind a table. "But," he smiles now, "there's not a single word about unicycles."

Still working on a place to stay, I ask this man of details for suggestions.

"Rosie's is just a couple blocks down the street. It's a gay bar, a landmark here in town. You could ask there."

I ride over to a brick building with only one small sign displayed on the front. It reads simply, "Bar." Tan has just arrived in town and she meets me here with her camera, wondering what we'll discover. Were I to heed all the warnings about gay bars I have received from people gay and straight alike, I'd see HIV viruses as big as cockroaches. I'd see sex-crazed men out to beat their personal bests of orgasms per night. I'd see the scourge of the LGBT movement, according to some who believe gay bars hold back popular acceptance of LGBT people. I'd also discover a piece of history woven deeply into the LGBT experience in America, one of the only places in times past where gay people could count on refuge.

Walking into this bar with its square counter, I see a dozen people sitting on bar stools. The bar man wears a muscle shirt and spends time working on his biceps. He might be a little older than I am. Hearing what we're doing, he asks Tan to keep the camera

turned off unless someone wants to be interviewed. He slides a beer over to me. "Enjoy yourself."

Three hours pass quickly at Rosie's. Tan keeps walking outside with one person after another to film their stories. One man I'm talking to invites me to see his new motorcycle, an 1800cc touring Suzuki. "I don't come here often," he tells me. "I've got my partner at home." Other than seeing the motorcycle, I stay inside Rosie's. A blonde haired man in his thirties tells me he's still not out to family or friends.

Springfield, Massachustts. At Rosie's Bar.

"I think they know, but I've never told them I'm gay. I fought it as a kid, but when I grew up one day I told myself I'd better face being gay, better get this over with, so I got in the car and drove here to Rosie's. I can still tell you where I stood when I walked in and where I sat that night." He points across the room.

"I was so scared I almost vomited when I walked in here."

When he's told his story, he talks about how he still drinks too much, all these years later, a literal attempt to drown sorrow. "Is it too much to want to find someone to love and to share my life with?" There are tears in his eyes, sitting here in his regular seat, still searching for how to put his life and his dreams together, the move out of the closet still too far a stretch for his imagination to embrace.

Only one man here appears drunk, and he's not doing it for fun. Grieving the death of a man I expect was his lover, he repeats over and over, "Couldn't they even give him a decent burial? He served in the military all those years." I've joined him at his table and I listen to the litany of his lament, feeling like a pastor again, wrapping into another broken tapestry, knowing open ears can be a gift.

A young black man talks to me for awhile. I ask him about what I've heard, that the African-American community is less accepting of homosexuality than the white community. He agrees when I share this perception, "but I'm secure in who I am. I acknowledge my feelings, my feelings for men."

An older black man takes time to talk with me. He works for public health, and takes time to speak with me about gay life, its history, and its changes. "The internet is replacing gay bars as a pick-up place," he tells me. "Not just for gay men, but men with wives and kids who come here for one-night sex with other men…lots of business people who are away from home come here. More and more, though, people are making their arrangements by internet."

When he talks about his work, he tells of the returning AIDS crisis, and even of "HIV Parties," where young people gather for sex, knowing they might get the HIV virus, wanting to "get it over with," trusting the drugs to keep them healthy. With medicines now, and with young people not remembering the epidemic and the rampage of death in the 80's, "too many people are forgetting to be safe about sex." He talks about relationships, about "your main squeeze". He tells about the tradition of older men taking younger gay men under their wings and mentoring them in how to live a fulfilling gay life.

Some very feminine men are here this evening, unabashed and unafraid of disparaging looks. "You're really married?" one of them asks for a second time. "That's so too bad. You are exactly what I've been looking for." He squeezes my leg. We all laugh.

When I join Tan outside, she's still filming. "Too noisy in there," she tells me. "These are great stories."

While she does one last interview I think of how Rosie's feels like I want church to feel. Years ago it was a safe place for the blonde-haired man to come out. Tonight it's a safe place for people to laugh or to cry their heart's pain. A black man and a white man love each other here, and no one gives a second look. This place is refuge.

The stories here flow easily, because this place is safe. Maybe this is why Jesus had such good stories to tell. He was refuge, a place where even outsiders felt safe to open up their lives.

The man who talked of the returning AIDS crisis reminds me of ongoing challenges in the LGBT community, but also how much the community has already endured. I remember back to Peg at the beginning of my trip and how she helped me think about suffering, how suffering can bring strength, how dealing with the contradictions of life can lead to wisdom. It would be great if there were no more suffering to talk about. In the meantime, I'll be thankful for Rosie's.

At 10:15 my phone rings. It's Eileen, the PFLAG coordinator I'd called in the morning.

"Have you found a place to stay?"

"No, we were just about to go walking around town, do some exploring, and then find a motel."

"We just got home from Washington, DC. I'm sorry I couldn't call you earlier. Do you still want to come over?"

Half an hour later we're at Eileen's place, eating eggs and English muffins for a midnight dinner. Tan sets up the camera after we eat. Eileen talks about PFLAG and about her gay son. I'm too tired, so I head for bed. One week of this tour is finished—185 miles pedaled. Tomorrow Tan will get some shots of Springfield, and then some footage of me in Connecticut. She'll leave in the morning to fly home to work, and I'll have the rest of the week to pedal all alone.

Chapter Nine

The Least Awful Alternative

TWENTY MILES from Hartford, Connecticut, pedaling into the hot afternoon, I realize how tired I feel from the first week of traveling. The weariness comes not from miles, but from the huge cascade of words and experiences. Shaded church steps offer a resting place where I nap half-an-hour before resuming my ride south into Connecticut. All three of these first states have passed gay and lesbian civil union or marriage law. Connecticut's law passed this spring, and will take effect near the end of the year.

Asking three people in a row what they think of the new law garners only vague responses, "Yeah, I think we have a law like that…"

Response is tepid here compared to the energy in Vermont and Massachusetts, but five people this morning have also told me homosexuality is a sin. One is concerned the school district has "bisexual teachers" working in it. Each of these people is adamant that they love everybody, "like Jesus tells us to," and homosexual-

ity is a sin to be judged, "like the Bible tells us. Marriage is between a man and a woman."

How can judgment fit into the time I've spent with David, Sara, Danielle, Greg, Willie, Rip, and the others I've met on the first part of this ride? How can we claim to love everybody if we take six isolated verses of Scripture more seriously than the life experiences of all these real people? How can we take these few verses more seriously than Jesus' own life of fully accepting the outsiders of his time? By noon I feel weary from the contradictions, frustrated at these judgments we cloak with the language of Christian love. Needing a break, I quit pressing my questions and settle into an afternoon of sabbatical rest. Keith's recorder has a radio function, so I plug in earphones to listen while I pedal near the Connecticut River.

Marlborough, Connecticut.

Reaching Hartford I stop for pictures of the river and end up talking with the park attendant. He's fascinated by One Wheel and we trade cycling stories. For a moment I wonder whether to mention I'm riding Straight Into Gay America, but I choose silence, keeping my sabbatical rest. Even as I take this choice of silence I recognize my freedom to engage or disengage this LGBT conversation on my own terms. For a gay person the decision to reveal or hide one's identity is constant and lifelong. Is it any wonder so many LGBT people choose closets?

My plan all day has been to overnight in Hartford. Instead, as evening approaches, I get a burst of energy. I decide to ride on and soak up more solitude. These hours of pedaling work for me like plugging a battery into a charger. When I'm out of juice for talking it helps to turn my legs on the pedals, focus my eyes on the road, watch the landscape unfold. I've been in conversation overdrive since I left home. All the new impressions will arrange themselves inside me at their own pace. I need some time to let them settle a bit before I add more words.

The countryside grows hilly as I ride east away from the river. As the sun sinks low, I stop to photograph a willow tree, branches dipping into a pond whose surface reflects the pink and purple colors of the clouded sky. Cows graze near the water in these fields that have borders of maple and walnut forest. I take my time here, drinking down a bottle of too-warm water, watching the colors slowly change on the ponds.

New developments of huge mansions dot the countryside every few miles. Old towns still hold the smaller homes of the past. I expect I could stop almost anywhere and start a conversation for a place to sleep, but when I pass a Goodwill store with open doors, I stop to buy a bed sheet. Finding one for $2.75 seals my decision. Tonight will be a full moon, and the quiet of a night alone feels refreshing. I'll be more ready for conversations tomorrow. A nearby grocery store has bug repellant, and as I pedal away I start searching for places to camp. I ride fourteen more miles before finding a perfect place.

The Hebron Lion's Fairground has a locked gate in front, keeping cars out. I walk around it to the grassy acres up the hill. Deserted booths for sheep and cattle all have fence around them,

but I can see how much action will arrive when the fair starts. Tonight, except for mosquitoes, I have the place to myself.

Leaned up against a fence rail, resting after this busy week on the road, I wish I could call and share this with Anne. The Holden Village Retreat Center where we live prides itself on being a place apart. No phone. No e-mail. Only a boat and the mail connect us to the outside world. The first week of this trip has held so much activity I've barely had time to miss my family. Now with a day of sabbatical to rest my mind, thoughts turn to home. I've received one message so far. Anne mailed a disc out by boat to a friend who forwarded it to me by e-mail. The letter told how the kids cried when I left, but it says they're settling quickly into the summer schedule. Holden comes with a constant stream of playmates.

Anne's busy too. Her days revolve around helping the hundreds of guests make their baskets and weavings, tie-dye shirts and other craft projects. She wrote about the backpacking trips she has planned for the next week. We're hoping for an overnight hike with the family when I return.

Alone tonight I think about our last two years at Holden. The decision to live in this intentional community is a dream come true. It was Anne's idea. She and I met there in 1983 when we were just out of college. In recent years we'd been volunteering at Holden for a few weeks each year, bringing campus ministry students along from Michigan State to introduce them to the village and give them a service experience. When Anne found out how much I'd be traveling with the publication of *One Wheel – Many Spokes*, she thought living full time in the Holden community would be good for our family. The two years have passed quickly. We'll leave at the end of July, and we'll take along memories to last a lifetime: waking up to the sound of glacier fed Railroad Creek, fresh air scented by a forest of fir, cedar, and pine, and our eyes reaching to the peaks of the Cascade Mountains. Hiking or skiing takes us to every destination, no cars for two years.

Unexpectedly, Holden also helped prepare our family for my ride Straight Into Gay America. Known for pushing the progressive edge of the Lutheran Church, Holden has long welcomed LGBT people. When Holden started its search for a new pastor last winter, two women requested the search process include a

public invitation for partnered lesbian and gay pastors to apply. Although national church policy doesn't allow partnered lesbian and gay pastors to serve parishes, Holden has policies of non-discrimination and full-inclusion. What seemed like a simple request turned tense and complicated.

The board of directors even got involved, and when they hesitated to agree on full inclusion, some started to question the values Holden claims. It all looked familiar to me, a repeat of my seminary days. I told Anne I'd hold back on this one, not get over-activated as I had before.

When the director of the board arrived at Holden, he set up a meeting with the management and with Jane and Erik, two representatives for the full-inclusion request. Reporting to the village that evening, the director advised us he'd take the question to the board and would seek as quick a response as possible. He couldn't consent on his own, even though our representatives argued he'd just be affirming what was already written down as Holden's policy of non-discrimination. Jane was asked for remarks. I will remember her words for a long time.

"It was the least awful alternative."

Another person shared his thoughts after the meeting. "How can this go to the board for a decision? How can you vote on a person's identity?"

Things changed that night of the "least awful alternative". Up until that evening, the group of people advocating for full-inclusion were meeting and writing advocacy letters and posting poetry and choosing to stay away from worship until it became a place of full welcome for all people. We had an energy in this group, centered on our cause. That night we handed the request over to the institutional process.

I've never seen institutions place highest priority on outsiders. The organizations I've been a part of always seem to try and balance how much edge they can include without putting the center at risk. I can agree it's a practical approach, but it conflicts with Jesus' method of putting outsiders in the center and heeding their needs first.

The least awful option. Those words stick. A dozen LGBT people lived in last winter's Holden community of 70 full-time

volunteers. They represented decades of experience in church and civic organizations, but they still ended up as the outsiders, having to push to get their voice heard, having to settle for least awful. They are our experts, but they are not the insiders.

At the fairground, the moon rises full and huge over the treetops, making me think of full-moon nights at Holden, especially in the winter, when you can ski by moonlight without needing a flashlight. I wonder what Anne is doing this evening? The time is three hours earlier in Washington; maybe she's visiting with friends.

Finding a place on the gravel parking lot that has no rocks, I roll myself into the Goodwill sheet, careful to cover myself against mosquitoes. Still, I wake every few hours to pour more repellant onto the sheet and onto my face. The sleep turns out bad, but it's a memory, waking at intervals to see the big circle of the moon beaming down on my campground.

At 4:30, with the sun lightening the sky, I get up and start toward New London. At a large Baptist church, I spot a man outside the parsonage. Dressed in a smart blue shirt, he turns out to be the pastor. His name is David.

"Marriage is between a man and a woman," David tells me. "The whole Bible says so."

"The whole Bible?" I ask. "The Old Testament was full of concubines and polygamy."

"That wasn't the intent of the Bible."

"What about homosexuals?"

"Love the sinner. Hate the sin."

Judgment. Rules. I ask David, "Should gays have equal rights?"

"They have civil unions."

"And that's OK?" I push him. He won't answer. I change gears.

"What about hair?" I ask David. He's got a smart-looking haircut.

"You'd look better with a haircut."

"Leviticus calls it an abomination. Right next to where it prohibits a man from lying with another man."

"That's just personal grooming. That's different from the Bible commanding marriage."

Maybe David really does have to leave when he says he does. Maybe he just doesn't want to face the inconsistencies, the subjective contradictions I almost always hear from literalists.

I get back on One Wheel, thinking about hair, remembering breakfast with Jen and Tan in North Hampton two days ago.

Jen says to me, "We have to talk."

Forking down my omelet, I listen to them tell how Sunday at Rip's church had been Jen's poorest day of the trip. "That interview with Mark and Steve had barely anything we could use. Maybe one or two lines from the whole forty-five minutes."

I reply, "That conversation is exactly what I needed."

"But we need tension. We need conflict," says Jen.

"I'm fine with what you need for the movie," I answer, "but I want to talk across the divide, not make more conflict. Remember how those guys told us our conversation was different? How they were surprised we found a way to talk together?"

"Well," Tan says, "you're kind of wordy. Just remember the tape is rolling. Get to the point as fast as you can."

Jen continues, "Tan and I also decided you have to cut your hair."

I chew down the last of the omelet while Jen continues, "You said you were going to cut your hair in Burlington, and you didn't do it. You still haven't found a barber."

I did say I'd cut my hair, and now, with them pushing me again, I agree once more I'll get it cut.

"We'll do it this weekend in New York," says Jen.

"You see, Lars," Tan adds, "we have to think of our movie. We have to package you and market you, make a good impression so people will hear what you're saying."

These are the words that stay with me all day as I pedal and scratch mosquito bites from the night before. "We have to package you and market you." *Package me. Market me.*

I call my mom and update her on my ride, telling her I'll be getting my hair cut in New York. She's glad. She's never liked this long hair of mine. Ever since I started growing it for Locks for Love, she's asked when I'm going to donate it to their wig-making project.

Personal preferences. Ideas of what looks neat and tidy. I'm fine with all of these, but Tan's words come back again. "We have to package you and market you."

Isn't this the whole problem I'm taking five weeks to explore? Isn't sexual orientation a package used to prejudge us as right or wrong, good or bad?

Ironically, I believe Jen and Tan and their take on marketing. The proof is in the lipstick and the business suits, the cellophane wrappers, and the next year of car models. Packaging rules. The proof is in my own life. I convict myself.

On this Connecticut morning, miles fly by. Penetrating words. My struggle is not about hair. It's about a courthouse marriage certificate, fifteen years ago, and a Lutheran ordination that still scars me. My doubts return.

Packaging. As I ride along I start feeling more and more strongly how packaging has been a part of my life. As a kid I even switched from left-handed to right-handed. I was born left-handed, an ancient sign of the devil. According to tradition, Jesus got to sit at the right hand of God; the devil got the left. My Dad didn't quote Bible to me as a kid, but he did believe in right-handedness. "If you're in the military and have to fire a rifle, you can't do that with your left hand."

I remember the long list of reasons why I spent warm Saturday mornings at the picnic table with Dad, in our Southern California backyard, practicing printing first and then cursive writing with my right hand. I remember learning to eat with my right hand at meal times, and I remember taking golf class in high school and learning to hit with right-handed clubs.

I remember when I started eating with the fork in my left hand again, after I grew up and moved away from home. I remember, twenty years later, starting to relearn writing with my left hand, and how poorly I did at it, but how I stuck with it until I could read my name in my native hand.

I still write with my right hand, bat with my left, golf with my right, and turn wrenches with the left. I grew up with a veneer of normalcy, but even which hand I use is a kind of coming out story.

In New London I stop at Dick's Sports to take care of unicycling business, changing my pedal cranks from five inches to four-and-a-half. I've made it through Vermont, and I'll no longer need the torque of the longer cranks. Now, heading for flat Long Island, this change will let me pedal faster. Paul, the store manager who helps me, asks where I'm riding.

"I've heard of you." He surprises me. "I've got a lot of biking friends. Some of them are following your trip." Turns out Paul is married to a United Church of Christ minister. We talk about church, and he laughs to me about how the churches he knows aren't looking for preachers. "They want fifty-year-old pastors to manage their endowment funds."

"Civil unions are no big deal," Paul tells me.

"We've got six couples on our block who are gay, and we love our neighborhood."

Two hours of writing at the New London Library helps me catch up on my journal.

When I'm finished I pedal down to the ferries to board the one heading for Orient, Long Island. On the sailing to New York I catch a nap, but not before Johnny Pizzano, a Viet Nam veteran, gives me a talking to.

"I'm from Massachusetts. A lot of my neighbors are gay and lesbian couples. Sure, call it marriage. If a couple stays together twenty years and then splits, they should share their assets.

New London, Connecticut. Crossing to Long Island.

"The problem," he continues, "is religion. Catholics are the worst. I know. I'm Catholic. A priest starts talking to me about homosexuality, I shoot back, 'What about all you pedophiles?' That's the end of the conversation. Baptists, too, they're part of the problem." Johnny is not the first to talk about religion, but his comments are the most direct.

He leaves, but then comes back to me ten minutes later.

"A footnote," says Johnny, his Viet Nam veteran cap atop his head. "I didn't go to war because I agree or disagree with homosexuality, but I did go to war believing I was protecting our freedoms. When I came back from the war, people were burning the flag. I totally didn't agree with that, but I believed I was fighting for people's freedom to burn a flag, no matter how I felt about it

personally. Turned out the war wasn't about freedom, but still, that's what I believed I was there for."

We talk about 9/11 and this era we live in, and whether he feels rights are being restricted.

"I went to jail for it," he replies.

A police officer had gruffly demanded to search his bag. "I know we need to tighten things up, but we can't turn into Gestapo. If a guy asks me if he can look at my bag, sure, he can look in my bag. That policeman came up and said, 'Your bag – give it over – open it up.'

"'Fuck you,' I told him. And when the judge reprimanded me for what I said to the officer, I told him to fuck off, too. No one will take my rights away. I went to jail for that.

"When I came back from Vietnam, people threw tomatoes at me, staining my uniform on my way to visit my Mom. It was shit. But those are rights. Use my name. You tell *that* story."

"Where do you find folks like you?" I ask.

"Vets," he answers. "A lot of vets don't agree with homosexuality, but we all went to war for our freedom to choose. That's what they told us when we went to fight, and we believed it. And when we found out the war was all shit, just about money? McNamara? Nixon? All of them? It made us believe even more strongly in our freedom and our rights. I'd go to jail again."

Part II

Central

Chapter Ten

Standing Through the Fear

DOCKING AT Orient I start unicycling through the hayfields, wineries and sod farms of this rural eastern end of Long Island. Houses are few. On this Wednesday evening I find Orient United Church of Christ. The OPEN AND AFFIRMING sign on their church catches my eye—something different here from Paul's remark about churches hiring pastors to manage their endowment fund concerns. "Open and Affirming" is the designation UCC uses to announce a congregation's decision to publicly embrace LGBT people.

When I knock on the door of the adjacent house, Pastor Ann answers the door. Conversation turns into dinner, then an invitation to join their church council meeting, and finally a soft bed to sleep in overnight.

Orient, New York.

Ann started serving this congregation five years ago. Turns out the church approved their Open and Affirming status only two months ago. At the council meeting I ask what brought the church to this new place. Ann has already told me of the gay couples who have summer cottages here in tiny Orient. One of the council members begins, "Two women joined our church. They were the biggest help. By the time we knew they were a couple, everybody had already fallen in love with them."

Another adds, "We offered all the classes and studies our national church has available, but not many people came to those."

An elder woman shares her memory, "When Carolyn and Diane preached that sermon, they told about their lives and what Open and Affirming would mean to them. That was the day I realized we had to make a public statement."

Before I leave in the morning Ann calls ahead to Sayville, sixty miles ahead, and arranges a place for Thursday night with members from the United Church of Christ. As I leave Orient and pedal onwards, my thoughts return to packaging and haircuts. Just two more days of riding until I arrive in New York City.

Every barber, and every person I've asked since starting this ride has told me to do what I want with my hair. When I ask further about making a good first impression for the documentary, some of them concede a haircut might help. The lesbian couple at Orient church made a good first impression, slipping in under people's radar. As folks there confirmed, by the time people discovered they were lesbian, "We all loved them too much to care."

This is what Tan's telling me, "Slip in under the radar, give us a chance to make our point."

I ride through ten miles of construction this morning, dodging potholes and pacing myself to the flow of flag bearers who stop and start traffic. I have energy for the road. I have energy for stories. But I have no more energy for trying to manipulate the line of whether people view me as an outsider or an insider. I've already done that game for years in church. Cutting my hair would be like returning to a closet. If I have to choose, I choose the margin.

I call Jen on my cell phone. "I know I promised to cut my hair, but I won't be cutting it in New York."

"What?"

I tell her what I've been thinking these last few days.

"I'm not really surprised," she answers, holding back disappointment from her voice. "You're kind of an idealist, aren't you?"

Idealism perhaps. A forced marriage certificate definitely. A muted voice as a pastor for sure. Time now to try to live my voice, to see if my voice is enough, or if Jen and Tan are right, that packaging makes a critical difference. In our sound byte society, I know I'm treading a fine line.

Times like these I especially like the Jesus
story. He chose the narrow path, the real margin,
the real conflict with reigning powers.
He lasted three years and ended up dead

on a cross. And the story goes he found
his life worthwhile and purpose filled,
so much so his story turned immortal.
No matter how far I veer toward the edge,

I'll never be more than a timid advocate
compared to the story that guy left in his wake.

Some people believe in signs. After the phone call to Jen, a car stops ahead of me, and a woman rushes out, waving frantic hands and hollering at me. I jump off my unicycle and she runs at me, arms outstretched. It's Kathy Spirtes. She and her family lived in Nome the same time Anne and I did. I knew she'd moved to Long Island, but we'd lost contact until now when she meets me on her local road.

We catch up on our lives over a long lunch. She reminds me of what I said and did as a pastor in Nome. Kathy heard me pushing for the edge, even from the pulpit. Her memories refresh me in the wake of changing my promise to Jen.

We give each other a parting hug and hope we'll see each other soon. I'd love for KariAnna and Kai to play with Alexandra again as they did when they were babies in Nome. The three-and-a-half years with Inupiat people in Nome changed Anne's and my life. I think about those times after I leave Kathy. To have a native culture embrace me was such a change from growing up in Los Angeles, where I knew only that the supermarket was my food source, and that I lived surrounded by ten million people.

In Nome, Anne and I would open our chest-freezer to get food out for dinner, often discovering someone had come by with another salmon, or a roast from a moose or reindeer. Living from the land was one gift of the freezer. The bigger blessing was community—living in a tradition other than our own. As part of that experience, I saw the damages done by cultures in conflict, and

learned more about accepting differences. Just as I wouldn't be riding Straight Into Gay America if I hadn't been kicked out of seminary, my time in Nome also shaped me for this tour.

Like other non-native people, I had romantic notions about indigenous life. The full freezer and the generosity of the Inupiat people fulfilled those expectations, but the work of pastoring was tough. I ended up in the challenges of living alongside the powerful, damaged, story of Inupiat culture. An elder in Nome called the people's history a story of multi-generational trauma, beginning at first contact with the explorers and continuing through forced schooling, the prohibition of speaking native languages, and the conflicts over land.

One spring I did funerals for six deaths, five of them were tragic. Only one of those funerals was for an old person. The others all died before their time. Each time, casket at the front of the church, people sang and wept. Each time I preached how we are all held in bigger hands. At the end of that spring I felt the holes and the questions as well as the hand of God. I spent my own year with depression, overwhelmed by daily challenges, and wondering all the time at the chances for this culture to survive.

Poetry Man points his finger. "Is this the paragraph?"

"Yes." Three days ago I was eating lunch with Pastor Paul at a Mexican restaurant. I was showing him a few pieces of my manuscript, and he stopped me here.

"I don't care about the rest of your story right now." Paul said. "I want to know about those five tragic funerals."

"So do I," says Poetry Man.

"It's a long story."

"I've got time."

"There was a suicide, a young man killed himself with a rifle."

It's years since I've recited this list.

"There was an old woman who drank herself to death at a party in Nome. There was a young woman who fell into the river at a bridge crossing in the country side. She got out, but her boyfriend who jumped in to save her didn't survive. There was a man riding his snowmobile who got lost in a storm and never returned. He died, and it took more than a month for search and rescue to find him. In the springtime a middle-aged

man and his wife drove out to the country to enjoy the return of the sun and the end of the bitter cold. She went for a walk and he jogged ahead around a corner and had a massive heart attack. When she caught up she found him lying on the road, dead.

"In Nome, if you're a pastor, you're on 24-7 for emergencies. There's nowhere to get away. By the end of spring only a husk of myself remained, burned from the inside out. You know that scripture about the refiner's fire. It put me into a year-long depression.

"Most people in Nome understood what was happening to me. Everyone there knew suffering, way more than I did. These were the family members of the ones who had died. These kinds of deaths and suffering had been going on since long before I arrived with my brand new ordination papers. So I trusted them, even from the pulpit. I let my suffering show.

"We had a miscarriage during that time, too. KariAnna was already born and then we lost twins. Six months later, on an early Sunday morning, I drove out to the airport before church to give a couple a ride into town. They'd just lost their baby, eight months into their pregnancy. I dropped them off at their home and then went to church to preach. And as I was preaching I shared about this couple and their miscarriage, and then I realized how close the date was to the six-month marker of losing our twins, and then I couldn't speak. I just stood in that pulpit, no words would come. I stood there for minutes. Anne came up to ask me if I was okay, and all I could do was nod.

"The amazing thing is I was okay. I didn't feel embarrassed to be speechless in the pulpit, even though I was always supposed to be in control of a good Lutheran sermon. I'd been with so many of these members in their times of speechless grief. Now it was my turn, and no one was fidgeting or anxious to fill up the silence.

"Eventually I got my voice and finished the service with the passage from the Bible I always used, 'And now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus."

Poetry Man is sitting there listening, and I'm kind of glad he's listening, and I kind of wish he wasn't. Those were sacred times. The biggest things feel the hardest to talk about. After that service an elder came up to me and said, "the spirit was really present today."

"Even the depression felt sacred." I tell Poetry Man. "After it passed I realized it came to burn performance and achievement out of me. No. It came to burn my *reliance* on performance and achievement out of me. It came because basing my identity on what I could accomplish wasn't up to those five funerals.

"I grew up with performance. Eagle award in Boy Scouts. Straight A's in high school except for the class in career exploration. Appointment to the Air Force Academy.

"But living in Nome there was nothing I could do to stop those deaths, or stop the tragedies of history. I had to learn to live with that truth.

"I remember the day the depression finally lifted. I remember a new feeling. Finally I felt relief. I told Anne, 'I may make no difference living here in Nome, but I finally understand that's not the most important thing. No matter what happens here, this is an appropriate place to be faithful.'

"That, for me, was the peace that passes all understanding."

I'm still not sure I like telling this to Poetry Man. I feel exposed.

"Do you see, Lars," Poetry Man finally says, "how if you tell these things, then I will trust you. Then I will know you. Then you can do anything you want, even stand in a pulpit without saying a word."

"I'm not feeling comfortable right now."

"And I'm not either. I'm wondering how this story of faith fits with you saying you don't believe in God anymore? That doesn't make sense to me. But I trust you more now."

"That was a time of faith alright. I remember how mystical that time felt. Lots of mystics have a hard time with conventions about God. After I left Nome I started struggling with how much we limit God by our definitions. But in Nome I lived face to face, every day, at an edge of extinction.

"Those five funerals were my little experience of something much bigger. One by one, hunting-gathering cultures have been exterminated throughout history. It's been happening ever since agriculture got going ten- or twelve-thousand years ago.

"As a pastor, I struggled with Jesus being part of agriculture. Jesus' parables are about agriculture. I used to preach the stories about sheep and sowing seeds to people whose whole tradition centered on the berries and roots of the land, and the seals, walrus, fish, and whales of the ocean.

"I used to sit in my church office under a five-foot-long tusk of a mastodon someone found in the sand at the beach. And I'd think about cultural extinction and wonder about the future right there in Nome, if Inupiat culture was going to end up like the woolly mammoths. Every time I flew down to Seattle, I was reminded how native culture gets wiped out."

I turn to Poetry Man, pausing, wondering if I've drifted too far. "Where's God in all this? You ask me about believing in God? Yeah, I needed a sense of God to get through all those funerals. I needed the love. But I became aware of agriculture and genocide, and the possibility that power and control are the human core, the God core, as much as love and compassion. You ask me about God? What can a person really say about God? The word carries death as much as life. I think the Hebrew tradition has it right. We shouldn't speak that word. It's too big. Sometimes I feel lucky the worst I suffered was a case of depression. When I think back I'm embarrassed at how assured I was when I spoke about God."

I pause to catch breath and gather my thoughts. I haven't been through these memories for a while, but they still have power to me. They're what I rode through the fifty states for, exploring all the native lands I could. Poetry man waits. I take a breath and wade back in.

"Nome was part of my preparation for riding Straight Into Gay America. I see similarities with LGBT struggles today. High levels of suicide. Ostracism for difference. Pressure to change and conform. In the conquering of the 'Wild West,' native people who used to roam the plains were given a hoe or a plow and a few acres on which to become farmers. They were told 'Land is worthless until it's under cultivation.' 'Don't be different.' 'Be standard issue.'

"Native people were supposed to become Christian before they were 'real people.' LGBT people are supposed to become heterosexual before they can stand without shame in the sight of God. The result is oppression and death. In the name of God. God is a scary word."

I ask Poetry Man, "That author who came to mind back at Rip's, the one who wrote about the sinfulness of homosexuality, remember me writing about him treating homosexual people like projects? I view that author the same way I look at those who beat native people for speaking their language, the people whose actions resulted in the genocide of native Americans in this country."

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions?" Poetry Man asks.

"Yeah, I'm sure that author believes he's doing a good thing. And I'm sure a lot of the people who caused Native American genocide had no idea of the result of their actions. But even with good intentions, these things happen."

"So what do you think Paul would say to you now?"

"I don't know. I'm so tired of religious language. I want new language." I comment back to Poetry Man. "I don't see you using religious language in your poems."

"Especially around Christians." Poetry Man laughs.

I laugh, too, then ask seriously, "So why are you bugging me about God?"

"Because this is about you, not about me. You're not walking away from your Nome experiences. You're not walking away from your LGBT experiences. You're not walking away from anything else, even your Dad. Why do you want to walk away from your language?"

Neither of us laugh. "That depression I mentioned. It lasted a year-and-a-half. Coming out of that and realizing I might not make any difference where I was, but that it felt like an appropriate place to be a faithful person, just the way I was, that was such freedom.

"And then a few months later we had a Cessna pilot visiting us with his wife. He was flying out to the small villages and transporting children to the Bible camp we had for all the area congregations. On one of those trips the clouds were low and he made a wrong turn and headed up a box canyon. He crashed and died. My depression was already over with when the crash happened, but after that memorial service, I realized my energy was gone, and I needed a break. Three months later we left Nome.

"My faith then was the strongest it's ever been, even with the holes in my life. Despite my depression and the tragedy surrounding me, I still believed there was a place for me in this world. Even when I didn't have the strength to continue ministering in Nome, I believed there was a purpose for me."

Poetry Man sits without saying a word, inviting me to continue.

"I realize life is bigger than I'll ever know. But the great cosmic manipulator who has his or her eye on every sparrow doesn't work for me anymore.

"The more I think about God the more questions I have. We make all these statements about things we don't even know about, and then we get in big fights over who's right about God. Some theologians prove homosexuality is against God's Order of Creation. Others insist God approves. Don't you think they're just projecting their own fears and their own hopes onto God? But no, they use God like an absolute statement, like it's totally objective, like it has nothing to do with personal experience. Don't you sometimes think they went to all those years of schooling just to get a bigger weapon, to use God talk as ammunition for things they're afraid to say from their own experiences? Why can't we all take a little more responsibility for ourselves, talk about our own experience instead of making proclamations about God's commandments?"

Poetry Man has me going now. I still rile up when I think about these things.

"That's why I'm riding Straight Into Gay America. I don't want to fight about God anymore. I headed out on the road with a bet that Jesus the human being was onto something, that compassion is the way to live, no matter what a person does or doesn't think about God. That's my gamble.

"And that's why my ride felt so strange to me," I tell Poetry Man. "I wasn't expecting to hear people talking about God from start to finish. I went out on the road to hear people's stories, but those stories were filled with more religious talk than I've been part of since seminary."

"It's part of your language too," Poetry Man says, "part of your experience, your story. It won't be easy, but you can't cut out parts of your life. Then you're only pretending to be honest.

"You're getting to the real stuff now," Poetry Man continues. "It doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to be real. You think there's not a reason Jen and Tan wanted to do a documentary of your ride, even though they don't want anything to do with religion? A pastor on a unicycle, advocating for gay rights? They knew there was a story here."

"I know why this is hard," I break in, retrieving another memory. "Back when I was in seminary a professor was lecturing on universal salvation and whether a person had to know Jesus to be saved. He came out on the 'gotta know Jesus' side. After class I went up to his desk with my questions, wanting to talk about my own belief that salvation has to be broader than believing in Jesus. I told him about bicycling across the United

States before coming to seminary, and finding the sacred everywhere, not just in churches.

"You know what his reply to me was?" I ask Poetry Man. "Just one sentence. 'What are your sources?'

"His reply felt like cannon fire. I knew I could never get more sources than my professor, never compete on the size of our bibliographies. And all I wanted was to talk about my experiences and how they fit with his lecture. He and I never had a real conversation.

"If a theologian was sitting here with us I'd still be afraid of getting shut down with a Bible quote or a bibliographic reference. I'm still afraid of getting overpowered by religious expertise, being told I'm wrong because of some expert source."

"Lars. Quit worrying about being right or wrong. Start believing in your story. Your story is those five funerals in Nome. Your story is getting kicked out of seminary. Your story is *Straight Into Gay America.* Write your story, not that professor's story. He has a story too. Let him write it. You can both tell true stories, even if they're different."

He pauses for a minute. "If you work a little bit, I'm sure you can tell me a whole list of stories of good experiences with professors and other pastors, right?"

"Yes."

"Good, but those don't matter here. It's Reference Professor that matters, Reference Professor who makes you scared to tell your own truth. He's your hurdle, but he also gave you what you needed.

"Just tell your story," he concludes. "Take care of your story, and the rest will take care of itself."

The glasses come back on. Poetry Man resumes reading. I need to find Pastor Paul again. He would listen to me all afternoon if I started down this path of conversation, and he'd be waiting for his moment. I wonder what he'd say.

My afternoon ride passes almost without me noticing. I've been back in Nome, my head full of the arctic. Arriving in Sayville I find the United Church of Christ congregation and refocus on the present. Ann directed me here to meet Val, the pastor, a partnered lesbian. This congregation has long ago moved to openness and inclusion of LGBT people. I meet Val with a sense of amazement. She's so at ease, so different from the Lutheran church I'm a

part of. Val's openness would get her kicked out of the ELCA denomination in which I am ordained.

Val has arranged for me to overnight at Jane and Gordon's home. Gordon, whose spry years number in the 70's, tells me about their Pastor Trevor who served the church for 27 years. "He was very progressive, and he shaped the character of this church. He had interns, and I remember him telling that when he brought female students along to the community pastor's meetings, some of the other pastors protested. I understand some of the current pastors aren't happy Val attends.

"John Geter was our first gay pastor. He stayed until his AIDS became too severe, then he left, I think to spare us the pain. He worked on his PhD after he left us. When he died, the church chartered a bus so we could all be present at his funeral."

Later they tell me of their lesbian daughter's coming out to them five years before. I ask how that was.

"Easy," answers Jane. "Because of our church, we were ready. There was no question we would keep loving and accepting our daughter."

After these last three days of wondering about my place at the edge of the road, Sayville challenges me. For 27 years here, some pastor worked from the center of the congregation he served, and he broadened both the middle and the edges of his community. In his wake of 27 years has come an open and welcoming congregation, happy to accept women pastors, happy to accept gay and lesbian pastors, happy to accept families and children who name themselves LGBT—happy to push on further than the pastor himself probably ever dreamed.

Some people ask me when I'll return to a congregation—perhaps this is their vision. Sayville and Orient show how to do the work of inclusion from within an institution. But is this the path for me, too? As much as I talk about the shoulder of the road, I keep wondering at my place in this world. Forty-four years old. I'm still struggling.

Jane invites me to join her at the church to peel 100 pounds of potatoes for a community chicken barbecue.

"Thanks. But I'd better get over to Fire Island for a visit. If I get back in time I'll peel whatever potatoes are left."

Known as a getaway for LGBT people, Fire Island Pines lies across the bay from Sayville, one of a number of small villages on the reef that are part of Fire Island National Park. Gordon drops me off at the ferry dock, and I approach the line where a hundred or so people wait to board. Almost all of these are gay men, openly holding and kissing their partners, completely comfortable.

Fire Island, New York

Stepping into the line I feel strangely ill-at-ease, apprehensive. I'm the clear minority here, the outsider. Visions of a sex-crazed party island enter my imagination.

Unwelcome thoughts surface
for the first time on this ride.
"Will I be threatened? Will I be safe?"
I register the feelings, force myself to wait

for the boat loading. This is the first
time on this trip I have the least uneasiness.
The last time I remember experiencing this anxiety,
I was visiting in Fairbanks, Alaska, just twenty years old

seeing calendars of naked men on the walls
of a home I'd hitchhiked to. I never thought this feeling
would come again, but here it is, forcing me to recollect
the first time meeting a man I knew was gay.

Sometime on the second afternoon
of that Fairbanks stay, Everett asks me,
"Head into my bedroom, would you? You'll find
a big pan for these prime ribs I'm prepping."

In the bedroom I discover the pictures
and posters on the walls, male models without clothes,
the first time I see such things.
I find the pan and return to the kitchen.

Just the morning before Everett had pulled his blue Ranchero
to the side of the highway to offer me a ride
to the Air Force Base in Alaska where, as an Air Force Academy cadet, I qualified for free stand-by flights.

On the way to the base I tell my college
summer story of hitchhiking through Alaska.
I reach the halfway point of my story
and tell how I am living on two dollars

a day, and with apples costing forty cents each
in Fairbanks, I am heading south towards Anchorage
and cheaper groceries. A moment later, he asks if I cook.
"Sure. I do eggs. Things like that."

"How about staying with me for the next three days?
I'm catering an oil company on Saturday

and I could use help prepping food.
I'll feed you all you want."

An hour later I am peeling carrots and watching
movies while I work. For dinner I eat barbecued salmon.
The friend who is visiting recounts, "We just went fishing
two days ago. Netted fifty-two salmon, over the limit,

but we couldn't help ourselves." Everett teaches me
to flip salmon omelets for breakfast.
"Just keep practicing," he offers,
and soon I am flicking them

just right. By the time I see these naked-man posters
I am liking Everett, savoring the improvement
over the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
I've been surviving on for my two-dollar

daily budget. Only after we cater the party,
and after Everett charges the company an extra
five-hundred dollars to give me for my labors
and only after he invites me on a vacation

to Homer with him and his friend
do I grow wary. Ignorant of any knowledge
of gay life I start interpreting all this kindness
as an advance, and I suddenly know

I don't want to camp in the same trailer with Everett.
His offer of a ride to Anchorage increases
my uncertainties. "No thanks," I insist. "Time for me
to get back on the road and see where it takes me."

Now, a quarter of a century later
I recognize how little I knew then,
how my ignorance caused my fear,
and how I interpreted acts of kindness

as veiled sexual advances. "Come on," I tell myself now. "How could I have been so stupid?" But I was that stupid. Living on the grace of my hitchhiking thumb, putting myself in the path of whatever came down the road,

my total unfamiliarity with gay
and lesbian life caused me to refuse
one of the kindest travel offers of the trip.
I am no exception to the harm of ignorance.

And I am still learning. Waiting for the boat to Fire Island Pines, I choose not to flee this time. I keep trying to consciously feel my unease. Looking at the line of men, with a dozen of them kissing, Pastor Ann's story comes to mind of the first time a lesbian couple embraced at the church in Orient.

"We have a very outgoing and very loving lesbian couple who are now members of our church. I remember the first time they sat at the front of the church and they put their arms around one another as they sat in the pews.

"My goodness, my heart went up into my throat. Then I took a breath, and then I told myself...all right, here we are. This is what we've been working towards for five years...but...my heart did take a jump that first time."

When Ann told me the story, I'd thought it a strange tale for her to share. Now I have the same feeling with my heart in my throat. Ann had her response, even though she has a practice of welcoming outsiders. Now it's my turn to react.

Standing in this line, I force myself to keep standing here, to keep feeling this moment. I'm doing the best I can right now. Ill-at-ease with my memories and my fears, all I try for is awareness.

The security guard in Massachusetts comes to mind, complaining about "the damn liberals, the damn immigrants, the damn Kennedys, and the damn homosexuals." He complained about gay people being, "in my face all the time." Standing here with my fears surfacing, I realize how often I forget the similarities we share.

Once boarded, our little ferryboat starts chugging toward Fire Island Pines. The conversation and shouts and laughter in the boat increase to match the noisy engine. After twenty minutes of crossing, we arrive and people grab their luggage, scattering onto the forested island. The dock is soon empty. Some party. Fire Island Pines is a collection of a few stores, restaurants, bars, and dance rooms. The rest of the island feels like a tree house.

Raised boardwalks connect every place on this sandy island. Like Holden Village, I see no cars. People walk everywhere. I explore for awhile, looking at the vacation homes hiding in the forest. There's almost nothing commercial on the island, just the establishments where the ferry landed. Thursday night on Fire Island Pines is almost completely dead.

It's so quiet here I can laugh out loud at my fears, and no one sees me to think I'm crazy. Back at the dock, I find a bar to order a seven-dollar beer, then take the next hour for myself. There's something else I've been remembering all day long. Today is my fifteenth wedding anniversary.

I am sending a postcard home to the family every day. Now, sipping the beer, I pull out fifteen postcards I bought especially for Anne. Starting with 1990 I write a card with my remembrances of our wedding and honeymoon that year. In 1991 we moved to Alaska. I get through 2001 before it's time to board the ferry.

On the boat for the ride home, comfortable this time, I feel sheepish for my feelings. I write the last four postcards as we chug across the water, and set them inside my journal for mailing tomorrow. Anne and I fell in love through letters. Writing these postcards brings back the memories of our long distance courtship between Minnesota and California.

Gordon picks me up when the boat docks. Back at his house, he makes sure I get settled in. "Cereal, milk, juice. It's all in the fridge for when you wake up. Here's some Gatorade for your water bottles. Have a wonderful ride. Thanks for what you're doing."

I fall asleep, missing Anne and the kids.

Chapter Eleven

New York City Pride

NEW YORK CITY.

At 5:30 a.m. I start from Sayville on the last sixty miles toward Manhattan Island and the most crowded streets in the United States. Orient had hayfields and summer homes. Sayville felt like suburbs. Now I ride through homes packed tighter and tighter, through traffic that grows ever busier. Through Brooklyn. Into Queens. Jamaica Road. Broadway. Now the road is covered by train tracks, the latticework of steel squeezes cars even closer together. Yellow taxicabs outnumber private cars. Horns become a Morse code of signaling, seemingly from habit more than frustration. Today is a day of pure unicycling, focused on the challenges of the road, the traffic, the train of miles that takes me from the tip of Long Island to the heart of Manhattan.

The New York City energy I remember from three years ago is still here, cars multiplying like insects, lanes narrowing to the width of trails, cars honking encouragement, people hollering at me with excitement. I judge green lights, grab onto light posts, bus

signs, whatever I can find when I have to wait for traffic. The only thing I miss is my riding partner Robert, who rode with me when I unicycled across the whole country three years ago and we reached this destination together. A man yells my name from his car across the street, just before I cross the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan. He turns around to park and jumps out to introduce himself. He is David Stone, long distance unicyclist who'd been e-mailing me three years ago during the cross-country tour. He opens the back of his minivan to show me his own Coker unicycle, just like mine. What are those chances?

Riding up the wooden pedestrian boardwalk to the top of the Brooklyn Bridge, I stop in the middle of all this buzz to rest and view Manhattan.

Three years ago I had this same view, closing in on my goal of the Statue of Liberty. I'd worried for weeks about how to unicycle into the Big Apple. People I met had added to my fears. "You can't survive in New York traffic." Instead, Manhattan turned into exhilaration. I've found no other place like it for intensity of unicycling. What I'd worried about as problem turned into thrill. Instead of individual car by car encounters, Manhattan made me feel like an ant in a colony, absorbed by the flow of this entire vibrating community. I never tired while riding in Manhattan; the streets kept every sense tuned outside my pumping legs and laboring body.

Now I'm back. The rush of bridge traffic and the hazy view of the financial district greet me as friends this time. Down the boardwalk, waving in return to people's greetings, I reach 3rd Avenue and head north. This time, instead of a date with a monument, I have an invitation to meet a man named Clay.

Hi Mr. Clausen,

I just read the article about your unicycle trip across America in the ADVOCATE magazine and just wanted to let you know how much I admire and respect this challenge you're undertaking. It's great to see that one person can feel that doing one special thing he believes in can make such a difference..……..and I know you will.

I want to invite you to stay with me and observe my life. I'm a 44-year-old art restorer living in the East Village section of Manhattan. I work at home and love what I do. I've been HIV positive for about 14 years now and am very healthy. I owe a lot of this to my spirituality, and believe that my diagnosis was actually a gift, something that made me see life in a different way. I was actually sick with symptoms back in 1991 and now I'm healthy and symptom free.

I worked on the AIDS Hotline at Gay Men's Health Crisis for a number of years, counseling people over the phone, and found it very rewarding. I'm currently looking for somewhere to volunteer, where I could be useful in a more personal role.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter, my best to your family, and if I don't see you on your journey, I wish you the best of luck and a lot of joy. And thanks again for doing it!

Much appreciation, Clay

Writing back to Clay, I told him of my desire to visit Stonewall, the place credited for starting the LGBT civil rights movement back in 1969.

> If you make it, we would definitely make a trip to Stonewall since it's only a fifteen minute walk (probably five minutes by unicycle if it's not rush hour!) from where I live. I'd love to show you other "gay important" places and areas as well.

I call Clay on my phone and hear his rich bass voice, the New York accent, slow words, each one surrounded with thoughtfulness. By the time I arrive at his apartment, he's sitting outside on the porch steps, making it easy to find his address. These East Side apartments are stacked together, wall to wall, five and more stories high. Wiry, less tall than I am, I instantly like this guy. He helps me haul One Wheel up to his top floor apartment. "Great exercise, no elevators."

"You'll sleep here." Clay shows me his loft bed in this tiny studio. I guess the whole apartment is just ten by thirty feet. Underneath the loft sits Clay's computer. "Use it all you want,"

he invites. The other end of the studio has a couch, a TV, and just enough floor space to do sit-ups. Clay has two "water closets." One holds a shower. The other has a toilet. The only sink is in the kitchen.

The couch and the loft are separated by the tiny kitchen. "This is where I spend all my time. I eat here. I work here. Sometimes I fall asleep at this table." Colored pencils and pastels decorate the wall space so Clay can reach for his supplies. He resurrects antique posters.

With a scrap of an original poster and the history surrounding it, Clay recreates the circuses, conventions, and events of a hundred years ago. "It makes me enough money to live." Clay has already told me three times how lucky he feels to have this apartment. "I only pay nine-seventy-five a month. That's because I've lived here fourteen years." He explains how the new tenant next door pays seventeen-fifty.

Manhattan, New York. Clay

Clay pours ice water for us,
and we sit at the table where everything
happens, the slow cadence of his story
begins a four-day roll.

"I've known I'm gay since I was two.
I wish I could say I knew
since I was born, because I'm sure
I was. I have an older brother and older sister,

and they used to bring playmates
home. My sister had a friend
who grew up to work
as a model. She was nice,

but the crushes I had. Wow.
They were always for the boys.
I loved it when my brother brought
his friends home.

As a kid I sensed
I was different
but I never had a word
for it. I always suspected

there were others like me,
but I had no idea what gay was,
or where people lived. I had no word,
either, for the feelings I felt. Not until fourteen,

when Harvey Milk and Mayor Moscone were killed
in San Francisco. That made news. I saw men hugging men,
and women hugging women, and learned the word "gay". It's
sad they got killed, but their death

was the cause of my knowing
who I am. From then on

I was biding time,
telling no one,

until I turned sixteen
and moved away from Long Island,
here to Manhattan. I love New York.
In the beginning I lived

on just a couple dollars a day
I worked in a bathhouse sometimes.
I did all kinds of work to survive.
Along the way I've met so many wonderful

people here. That's why I love New York.
You ask about my life. I'm thankful
I'm gay. If I had my life to do again, I'd want
to be gay. I mean, I'd like to try being straight,

because of curiosity, but being gay has been
a wonderful life for me. I'd want to do it over.
You ask about gay marriage. I'd like
to see it. Couples walking the street, holding

hands, walking with children, nice. So many gay men
have no goals. So many gay men, still partying,
long past the age when the wild life normally
winds down. If they could see a goal

like a family, maybe
it would help.
I want
kids.

HIV. I cried
for a month when I learned.
So many died in the 80's and early 90's.
You saw people giving up before your very eyes.

Death got to seem normal,
but I have attitude. I was sick in 1991,
but I've learned; meditation, herbs, natural
remedies and pharmaceuticals all help.

I go days without thinking about HIV.
I have no symptoms. Young people today
don't worry about AIDS, thinking medicine
will keep them safe, forgetting safety, counting on drugs.

I'm healthier now than before HIV.
I never go to church; we never did,
but I pray all the time. I plan
to live a long time."

Here in Manhattan, between an interview with Sirius's Gay Radio Station, tours of West Side, East Side, and Uptown, an interview with the new Logo Gay TV Station, and time spent cooling in front of Clay's air conditioner, I fall in love with the city and Clay's kind hospitality. On Saturday night, we stay up until midnight, painting my logo onto a five-foot by eight-foot rainbow flag for the Pride Parade. I stand in the kitchen watching Clay on the floor, bent over his work, using his art skills.

Everything about Clay comes out positive encouragement. "You're going to see so much tomorrow," he tells me. "And people will really appreciate you. A straight pastor out riding for gay rights."

"It's not easy to get a spot in this parade," he tells me. "You're an important part of tomorrow."

Jen has returned to the tour for more filming, this time with her partner Ann. I sense no hard feelings about my hair length. All of us focus on New York City and the Pride Parade. "They can stay here," Clay offers when he finds out their accommodations are in New Jersey. After the banner dries, we get some sleep before entering parade day. Clay takes the couch. I claim the floor. Jen and Ann share the loft.

Manhattan, New York. Painting the banner.

"Equal Rights. No More. No Less,"
the theme for this year's New York City
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride
Parade, the biggest, oldest procession in the country.

"Have a Happy Pride," 100,000 people wish each other. The news reports on the degree of political focus by this year's parade, more than in the past. Energy is building for marriage and equal rights. Even with the politics, drag queens have come by the hundreds, dressed to impossible perfection; some as women, others as beautiful birds, some as androgynous creations. These drag queens—they bring a reputation to pride parades and they give an image to LGBT life that makes some people complain.

But what's the difference between this dressing up and the sexual flash of high school proms, masquerades, and wedding gowns? What about Cosmo magazine, and the flesh at every grocery store checkout? Front-cover bikinis. Front page headlines, "New Sex Survey," "Three New Positions," "Please Your Man in Bed."

One time, long ago, on a corner in Lexington, Kentucky, Trappist monk Thomas Merton had his famous experience of standing on a sidewalk corner and realizing suddenly that he was part of everyone, and everyone was part of him. Standing on the corner of 5th and 52nd, I watch this whole loud scene turn beautiful before my eyes, drag queens included.

Two elder men in matching red shirts and black pants walk towards me, carrying a sign, FIFTY YEARS TOGETHER— ONE YEAR MARRIED. They live in Massachusetts now. Fifty years ago they met in Central Park. One week later they moved in together. They have been partners ever since.

Fifty years. Last year's Massachusetts marriage law allowed them to finally get married. "We weren't going to do it," they tell me. "After 49 years who needs a wedding? But when other couples started lining up for marriages, we realized the story we have, and we decided on a wedding. We went all out. It became so meaningful to us."

Their 50-year journey is beyond my imagining. As I step back from them and watch others come forward to touch their story, I feel both grateful for their persistence and angry at their need to struggle for these rights. I feel thankful these men lived long enough to see gay marriage in Massachusetts, but so many others have not lived to see the day.

The Thomas Merton feeling of connection to everything is still with me. One piece of this parade day feels hopeful and beautiful. Energy has gathered from all different walks of life, to celebrate identity, hope and commitment to justice. The other piece of this day feels like tragedy to me, a death-march memory for all the lives lost, a funeral procession for all the opportunities that have gone unrealized because of forced closets, discriminatory laws, and bigoted oppression.

Oppression damages far more than the target group. What if LGBT rights had never been questioned? What if people could have spent 50 years working on something other than gaining official recognition in Massachusetts for the love of these two red-shirted men? What if LGBT rights were here now? What if the political force of this parade could turn to world hunger, global peace, sustainable living, safety for all children?

I could think "what if" thoughts all day long, but I would miss out on this parade. This is a day to soak in experience. I wave farewell to the newlyweds and continue my pre-parade walk, discovering who else I share this day with.

Walking by the Dykes on Bikes, they invite me to ride my unicycle between two rows of Harleys. Hundreds and hundreds have arrived for the parade. A dyke snaps a picture. A man nearby shouts, "This used to be all about gay men. Then the women got involved. Now they lead the parade and we follow," He laughs. "Used to be Gay Rights, now it's LGBT. We all work together." He laughs again.

My own place in the parade is at the end of the religious and spiritual section. Straight Into Gay America follows the Queer Dharma Buddhist group, the St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, the largest LGBT focused synagogue in the world and dozens of other religious organizations reaping the benefits of living out their faith tradition's call to compassion.

The Metropolitan Community Church of New York hands out stickers ahead of us. Yellow printing on round red stickers says GOD MADE ME GAY, or GOD MADE ME LESBIAN, TRANS, BI. For myself I choose GOD MADE ME QUEER. The sticker fits. When everyone else heads straight down the three-mile parade route, I start a queer route, circling, figure-eighting, back and forth, riding in place when the parade stops.

Families with kids are watching the parade, young men on testosterone afterburners stand bare-chested, shouting words to every moving thing. People hold banners, snap pictures, stack sidewalks. The one thing I almost miss are the protestors, the ones who get so much television time to contrast with the drag queens.

While I do see hundreds of queens today, I count only four tiny knots of angry poster-holding protestors. The largest group

has seven people. In all, I see no more than two dozen gay-bashers in this sea of 100,000 people. As a man tells me during a conversation, "Protestors have given up on New York City."

Manhattan, New York. Pride Parade.

Jen has been looking to film conflict, and she makes the most of these ragged little groups. I catch a few words as I pedal my circles. The joy of this celebration has an inverse effect on the protestors; they spit hatred from reddened faces and over-stressed voice boxes. Tiny Jen stands close to them and points her camera, facing their storm. This documentary is Jen's work, but her face proves how much these angry words hurt souls. At the third of the four groups, one protestor is out of control. Police officers give him a choice of better conduct or arrest. Two dozen people. That's

all. Why so much coverage from America's media? Maybe like Jen, we all want to see conflict.

I'm on the route from 3:30 to 6:00 p.m. By the end of the ride my odometer tells me I've looped and circled a 12-mile parade. Clay has carried our banner for almost the whole parade, cutting out for home just before the last blocks. Jen and Ann have filmed the entire route, and they follow Clay home. I finish the parade as it squeezes through narrow Christopher Street and over to the West Side of Manhattan. Tens of thousands of people are staying for a party. Ten hours after leaving Clay's apartment, I feel tired enough to head back for rest. A week ago Keith Cash and I joked about being queer unicyclists. Now I'm wearing a sticker that says "GOD MADE ME QUEER." Language keeps changing. What do we call ourselves?

LGBT or GLBT? The homosexual community, or queer? Lesbians are butch, femme, lipstick, U-Haul. Do I say transgender or transgendered? A professor wrote to warn me "always use transgender," but when I was visiting Danielle, she called herself transgendered.

Homosexual as a term was coined in the 1860's, now some people don't like that word. Before that time no one had a specific label for same-gender-attracted people. The 1920's brought Gay, then Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender followed, and the acronyms. Does G or L come first? Hierarchy? Even in this acronym? Like so much else in our society? Like the ranking of heterosexual above all other gender expressions?

L, G, B, T, can arrange twenty-four possible ways.

LGBT	LGTB	LTGB	LTBG
LBGT	LBTG	GLBT	GLTB
GTBL	GTLB	GBTL	GBLT
BGLT	BGTL	BTGL	BTLG
BGTL	BGLT	TGBL	TGLB
TLBG	TLGB	TBGL	TBLG

Manhattan, New York. Dykes on Bikes.

Manhattan, New York. Straight Into Gay America.

Sometimes intersex people are added to the acronym, these one in a thousand or so people born with ambiguous genitals so the decision of male or female biology is not clear at the time of birth. Sometimes Q is added for queer. Sometimes another Q for questioning. Sometimes people like me get included with an A for ally. The longest acronym I've ever seen was in Montpelier, where the state liaison for GLBT affairs rattled off their current acronym, GLBTQIQA—40,320 arrangements— the number of words in a short book.

Unicycling home from this parade, I want to add S for Straight. Can I join the list of categories, instead of being the one single category against which all others are judged? LGBTQIQAS has 362,880 combinations, more arrangements than all the words of War and Peace. And still, not one combination says anything about personality or values or hopes or dreams. That takes the Mona Lisa, or a story from Tolstoy.

The more days I ride, the more I rebel at the arrogance of the label "straight." Maybe it's the pastor in me. The best part of my training at seminary always emphasized the mysterious side of God, how God's presence is often murky and unclear—tilted toward strange ones and outsiders. The Hebrew tradition emphasizes strangers should be treated as kin. Jesus really did hang out with prostitutes, tax collectors, sick and unclean people. My whole idea of God in the Christian tradition is a reminder that life has twists and turns, not much to call straight. A lot of Christians…

Poetry Man has suddenly stopped reading. "Your whole idea of God? A lot of Christians? Watch out, you're losing your story. It's your head talking, it's not your story. I don't care much about your God ideas. I want your God story."

He stands up and stretches. "Lets call it a day. We'll look at this next time."

Chapter Twelve

E-Coli and Jesus

A WEEK PASSES before I return to Poetry Man. He is making tea in the kitchen when I arrive, this time it's a Japanese green. I put my manuscript on the coffee table by the couch and walk back to the kitchen. I'm starting to feel the routine of our meetings. There at the counter, measuring tea leaves into his favorite cast iron teapot, he asks me again about not believing in God.

"The problem with this conversation is I'm an ordained pastor."

"But you're a human being too. And you're a writer. It's not about your story being *the truth*. It's about being faithful to the story you have."

"For a pastor, though, it's about having the truth, at least for Lutheran pastors. The ELCA only ordained me after I repeated their long list of 'I believes.'"

He pours steaming water over the leaves, and the tea begins to color in the pot. I tell Poetry Man, "I remember one

time at seminary I argued if we all believed we could see a little green elf-man in the corner of the classroom, and if we all worshiped that elf, that would be our God. My professor got really agitated in his disagreement with me.

"Another time a teacher read a story to us by a retired pastor, how for many years he had no longer believed what he preached, but he kept coming back each Sunday to speak his words, because they were the belief of the community. The teacher described this as a beautiful sacrifice, the poignancy of living in a community bigger than ourselves. I remember thinking it was pretty pathetic, losing his voice. I wondered how this pastor's experience relates to all the depression among clergy. Now, though, I guess I'm in similar shoes. I quit preaching, except when I'm alone on my unicycle."

Poetry Man checks the tea, asking, "What are you afraid of?"

"Destroying someone else's belief, the things they hang on to so they can keep hanging on. I told you about some of the people I buried. Pastors spend a lot of time helping build safe spaces for people in crisis."

"What about the prophets?"

"That was where I got my energy, but either I'm not good at the prophetic part, or the church isn't good about accepting prophets."

"What could you say that would destroy someone's faith?"

"Depends on the person. Some people need a literal Bible. Some people need Jesus to be the only way. Some need church to be a cozy social club. Others need heaven to be a physical forty acres, somewhere in the sky. And some need an afterlife. I'm okay with everything ending in compost. I'm okay with being surprised—or not surprised."

"Where do your questions come from?" Poetry Man has poured our tea. Instead of heading for the living room sofa, as we always do, he pulls back a chair from the big rectangular kitchen table. I do the same, sitting down, facing him across the oak surface.

"I told you about Nome. Before that, though, the first time I bicycled across the country, the Grand Canyon was on my route. After I arrived I attended an open air rim-side worship service. The preacher gave a sermon about a lighthouse, and how the light was like Jesus, a beacon in the storm of life. He never mentioned the Grand Canyon, even with us sitting on the

rim, right there, looking at all the colors and the contours, and all those millions of years of earth's labors. I'd already been thinking about these things, but my sense of Jesus changed forever that day. Two-thousand-years-old and we say Jesus is Lord of the universe? Two-thousand years is nothing. Doesn't it seem a bit presumptuous, even if you're not looking straight into the Grand Canyon?

"From the canyon I bicycled east onto the Navajo Nation and then through Hopi Land. They have their own stories about how the universe came to be. How are we going to match our mythology and our science and survive these next hundred years? Some scientists now calculate humans have just a fifty-fifty chance of surviving this next century.

"What are we talking about when we say Jesus answers prayer? What does it mean to have a spiritual life? This is why I'm reluctant to use God language."

"Do you pray?" Poetry Man asks.

"Yeah. And I pray to Jesus. Every morning. Isn't that strange, for being as language-scared as I am? On the unicycle tour I'd lay still for ten or fifteen minutes every morning before I got up, thinking about the day ahead, praying for Anne and the kids and the whole wide world. It's what I'm used to. It's how I ask my questions, how I face uncertainties."

"Sounds to me like you believe in God."

"Maybe you like that term more than I do. What do you mean by God? I feel like we're always saying way more than we know. I'm tired of arguing about God, pushing against the definitions of the church I've been part of, working the questions I have for where religion is headed. I have no idea what prayer means, except that I'm hoping for a better connection to the life I'm living. I have no idea what Jesus as God means, but I love that guy Jesus as a human being. I really love that guy. He was the outsider who lived on compassion as long as he could, until the insiders killed him. And he seems like he was okay with his fate."

Poetry man has uncorked me. My feelings pour out.

"Compassion. If there's a message from God that makes sense to me, it's compassion. If the Bible shows anything else to me, it's that institutions hardly ever want to risk compassion. Compassion threatens order, the constant battle between keeping old rules and letting grace break those rules.

"Some people fight their battle inside the church. Jesus did it from the outside. Maybe I rolled my dice last summer, and

rode a thousand miles to see if I could follow compassion from outside the system.

"You see why I quit preaching? It's hard to do that work in church."

Poetry Man lets my words settle, then replies, "Lars, it's hard to do that work anywhere, inside of church, or outside. Remember how you told me you wanted to be a reporter on this trip? Thought you had an easy way out?

"It's not about whether you're a pastor or not a pastor. It's not about being inside the church or outside the church. It's like you said yourself; it's about following a story about a guy that only survives for three years once he starts living his own story. It doesn't matter whether you're a pastor or a poet, it's damn hard to tell that story, and when you do, most people don't want to hear that story. We don't really want to hear how death and life are so close to each other, how hope and failure make love every chance they get. Maybe that's why we talk about God so much—using God talk to avoid real life, because we're so scared of that story. We don't want Jesus' life to end up being our own."

Our teacups are drained by now. Neither of us moves. I'm thinking about church, and Poetry Man is thinking about the poems he's carved out of his life. He shifts in his seat and adds, "Most of us are going to do everything we can to avoid the risk Jesus lived. But for a few of us, it will save our lives. Telling it might save yours."

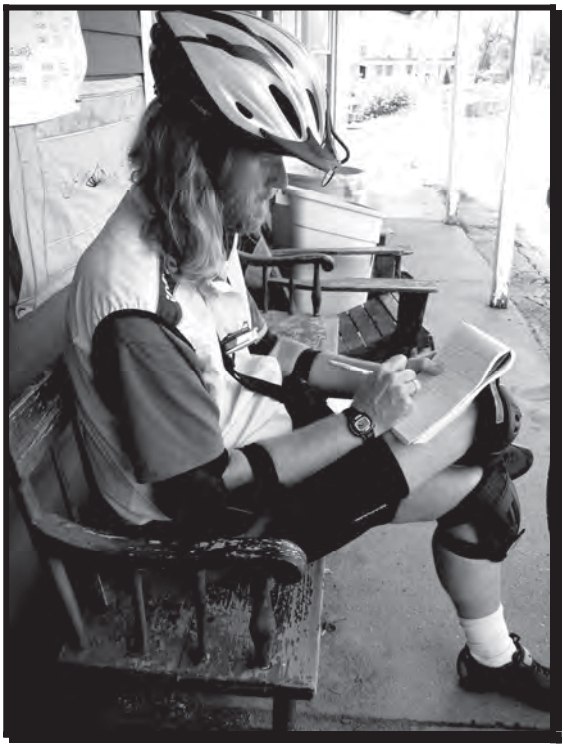
"Hey Paul," I get him on the phone as I drive home from Poetry Man. "Time for a coffee?"

After we meet at the Vogue, I tell him about my morning at the kitchen table. He listens with his incredible patience. When his chance comes he dives in.

"So he gets those three years, and then he gets crucified. And what does he say when he's looking at the people from the cross? 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' That's what I mean when I'm talking about loving the church. It's about a whole lot more than being Lutheran or Christian or whatever. It's about being a human being in this world. You're right. Compassion is what makes you human.

"I don't care how you find it Lars, but I want you to find it."

We drink our coffee slowly. I don't say much more. Pictures come to mind of the many other people who have also pushed me, pulled me, and wished me well through the years of my journeying. I've preached on compassion for years, but today Paul tells the story his way. Today he joins the long string of others who keep helping me to come out of my fears and come into myself. When we've emptied our cups I say thanks, and we head our separate ways.



Writing the ride.

My unicycle continues to be my metaphor—the edge of the road in tension with the center lane. My dad keeps wanting me to get to the center. "Those are the people who make our country what it is," he tells me. Pedaling in those fast lanes I risk collision and death. One Wheel doesn't match a speeding SUV.

But if I pedal on the shoulder of the road, in my glow-yellow vest, with my helmeted head, those SUV's pull over and stop. People step out with cameras in hand and questions to ask. Then we're all off the road together, standing in the same graveled pullout. Sharing stories. The life and death of calculating safe passage ceases while we speak. For at least these moments of our encounters, we stand still in the same place, seeing and hearing the same things.

When our conversations end, the vehicles accelerate back to 60 miles-per-hour and I resume my pedaled pace. We return to the friction between the speeding mainstream and the slow edge as we share the same road.

I think of Poetry Man questioning me about God. Yes, I could tell my story with Jesus' words, how he's a traveler himself, a wanderer who stops for stories, who lives in tension with the rabbis and the synagogues and the politics of his time, that inertial mainstream that needs to exist, but which makes his passage dangerous even to the point of death.

Still, I resist Jesus language, because this outsider experience has been so co-opted by advocates of power and status quo. How can a person read the Bible and see Jesus as an advocate for the mainstream? I don't get it. Crucifixion is not a mainstream experience.

Suddenly I'm remembering back to my campus pastor days. Richard Lenski and I are eating lunch at a Chinese restaurant across the street from Michigan State University. I'm arranging a science and religion lecture for the community as part of my campus ministry work. Instead of nailing down conference details, I keep asking about Professor Lenski's research on *e-coli* bacteria.

"We've raised 12,000 generations of *e-coli*," he says. "By changing the environments for different groups of cells we can see how bacteria adapt. Over many generations we can observe their evolution."

Lenski's explanation of mutation opens a new world for me. "Most cells are standard," he explains. "They do what's ex-

pected of them. Don't disregard these cells. Without them there is no culture."

I eat more rice with my chopsticks as he tells me the role of gene mutation. "Every culture has mutant genes, and the rate of mutations is constant.

"Most of these mutations die," he continues. "Most mutations have no effect on the whole culture. But, every once in awhile a mutant bacteria affects the whole culture, and the culture evolves into something new."

Lights start turning on for me. I'm already thinking about Jesus as he concludes, "Don't disregard the mutant genes. Without them the culture would never adapt to changing circumstances and it would eventually die."

Jesus is the mutation. He tells his story from the mutant side. His voice made a difference. He made the whole standard culture shift.

After lunch I spend the rest of the day walking around campus, trying to make connections, wishing I'd studied biology to go along with my theology. Jesus as a mutant gene unlocks a whole new world for me.

Mostly what I've heard about Jesus is the story of his uniqueness, the only Son of God, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Savior of the World, so different from humanity. We're told we should try to follow Jesus' example, but then we're warned we are all standard cells, no one can be Jesus.

I feel as if scales are falling from my eyes. Back in seminary we talked about Jesus being fully human and fully God, both at the same time. But out in the real world, the human side, the vulnerable side, gets much less attention than the almighty, all-powerful, all-judging characteristics of Jesus as God.

E-coli culture tells me Jesus is being created all the time, a mutant gene. Being Jesus isn't the unique thing. What's unusual about Jesus is he's one of the mutations that has a visible effect, that changes the whole culture. Being heard, mutating the standard cells, making a culture-shifting difference, that makes Jesus unusual.

E-coli culture lets me see Jesus as a mutant who had a message for his time, a gift that found a home. When Jesus gets asked about his family, he points away from his mother to his disciples. "These are my family," these who have given up everything to follow Jesus, these who have traded standard existence for the mutant edge.

E-coli culture clarifies my view—raising up the mutant family of Jesus, all the ones who have had culture changing impact; Buddha, Mohammed, Crazy Horse, Gandhi, King, Tutu.

After living in Nome and gaining a sense of the spirit that extends beyond Christian doors, *e-coli* finally gives me language. The mutant gene is knocking at the door of every culture, offering new ways to view the world.

Maybe best of all, *e-coli* could grant me peace. I've read over and over again how important it is to let go of results. Eastern traditions talk about this more than Western, but the thought is almost everywhere: Take the journey for its own sake, and don't worry about results. I am not very good at this.

E-coli speaks to me. "If you're a mutation, then you're a mutation. Be who you are." Most mutations make no difference, but still, mutant genes are indispensable. Without this mechanism of change, cultures die.

If I can just remember this, perhaps I'll learn to walk differently in this world. Though I'll likely make no difference to the culture of this world, I'm part of a vital tradition, the cultural edge, the mutant gene.

"Most mutations make no difference." Instead of fatalism, I could find freedom in these words, freedom to be me. When I recovered from my depression in Nome, I had a similar feeling of freedom, even if I made no difference in that place, it felt like an appropriate place to be faithful. In Nome I used Christian language. Now I have *e-coli*.

In the time since meeting Professor Lenski, I've been told by some, "Don't talk about God as bacteria." I think those are standard cells talking. "We already have eternal truth. We already have the answers."

I look wherever I can find help. Ever since Lenski's explanations I know we need both sides to make *e-coli* flourish. I appreciate this when I look at a Petri dish, visualizing an evolving culture. I have a harder time keeping Lenski's explanations in mind when I find myself embroiled in the battle between conserving status quo and finding new ways. Sometimes I think of *e-coli* when my dad and I talk together, how we each play different parts in our culture. Other times I just feel friction.

"Most mutations die and make no difference," Lenski had told me. Strange blessing. A mutation's job is to be a mutation, not to know results: what will happen after the SUV drives away from our roadside visit; what will our country be like after

the gay marriage debate runs its course; will some leader create a new religious worldview for our planet; will a crucifixion become a transformation? What are the effects of my unicycling in a Pride Parade?

When I finally get back to the front of Clay's apartment I feel weary from the long day at the parade. As I hop down from One Wheel for the last time today, a man walks by and exclaims at my unicycle. I start one final conversation. The little terrier he's walking sits patiently on the end of its leash. Like others have on this trip, the man eventually asks if I'm gay. He's gay himself, middle aged, his hair is still blonde, almost the same as his dog.

I've answered straight before, and then gone on to answer questions about why I'd do a ride like this. Today I try new words, "Not gay. But I am queer."

"What's that mean?"

"It means I want to be included as a heterosexual together with every other sexual identification. Everyone else in the parade today got stickers; God Made Me Lesbian, God Made me Bi, God Made Me Transgender. Can't there be a word that includes all of us?"

I show him the God Made Me Queer sticker I'm wearing on my shirt. "Wouldn't it be good if there was a word for all of us together, including heterosexuals?"

"Why choose queer?"

"Because queer feels truer than straight. Straight makes it sound like heterosexuals have everything figured out better than the lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgenders. I don't believe that. I think life is pretty much queer, no matter who we are, even if we pretend we've got everything under control. Queer describes my life."

He laughs. "Mine, too. I grew up in Kansas, helping my Dad raise cattle on a ranch. Now I live in Manhattan, working in a high-rise."

I tell him about my 50-state ride and the southeast corner of Kansas that I rode through.

"I lived in the other corner of the state, north of Colby." We talk about Kansas for awhile longer, until his dog gets anxious for them to resume their walk.

Terrier Man wishes me well. "I'll check your website and see if you get anywhere with calling yourself queer." He laughs one more time.

I walk into Clay's apartment and start pushing One Wheel up the five flights of stairs, thinking if Jesus had been here at the parade today, he might have worn a sticker too, announcing his place on the edge: "My Father made me Queer."

Clay and I end our day watching *Larry King Live* with guest Billy Graham. Billy's "Last Crusade" and the Pride Parade are the two big events of this weekend in NYC. I explain to Clay how Billy seems different from the fundamentalists so known for hateful and exclusionary rhetoric. We listen to him repeat apologies for past mistakes and reiterate his central message with absolute sincerity, "God loves You." Clay and I wonder if Larry will pop the question relating the weekend's two events. When he finally does, Graham announces, "Homosexuality is a sin." On further questioning Billy repeats the oft-heard phrase, "Love the sinner. Hate the sin." Clay and I give a tandem groan, watch through the end of the interview, then go to bed.

On the next day my visit with the dean of Union Theological Seminary provides an altogether different explanation of religion than the words of Billy Graham. I ask Dean Euan Cameron for thirty minutes for Jen and me to interview him, but he willingly gives us an hour, offering an extended and unequivocal affirmation of full inclusion for queer people.

"The doctrine of creation affirms
God accepts us as we are created.
Clearly some people are created gay,
or lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

"The doctrine of redemption," he continues,
"is not about God forgiving or tolerating
the sin of homosexuality. The doctrine
of redemption concerns all of us coming up

short of being fully who we are created to be,
fully loving, fully compassionate.

Redemption helps us understand
there's a place for everyone in this world."

Dr. Cameron talks about the great challenge
of respecting and honoring diversity. "It's far
easier to create exclusionary laws,
especially around sexual practice." Listening,

I feel a confirmation of this ride, Straight Into Gay America.
As we close our time together, I ask a practical question
of what to do about Billy Graham's approach.
"Love the sinner, hate the sin, is not really love.

It's only love *if*—love *if* you will do this or be this
or live this way. We can't ask this of people
if it goes against who they are created to be."
This dean has the words I need to hear.

Yes, there are things we should and should not do, but the marker for all our decisions is compassion, not static rules. We need compassion toward our sense of God—compassion toward our understanding of ourselves—compassion toward our relationships with others and the wide world. Harder work this is than simply splitting the world into good guys

and bad guys, insiders and outsiders.
"Hard work," says Dean Cameron,
but this is the work of being human,
the work of being faithful.

I could pedal all day
on the refreshment of a visit
like this. Riding south out of Central Park,
the skies open up and rain pours down hard.

I duck inside a gourmet bakery with price tags above my means. Still, it's dry. I get a seat at a 25-foot-long oak table, order a roll and a lemonade and start another conversation.

"Funny of you to ask," says Olivia, my server. "I just finished reading an article about the anti-gay crusades that are forming. They're using the word crusade now. I got a gag reflex while I read that article. Who do they think they are not to give equal rights to people?"

"Do you mean marriage or civil unions?"

"Marriage. Civil unions aren't equal. If gays want marriage, give it to them. More power to them. My friends and I can't make it work," she points to her two coworkers. "If gays think they can, they should have the chance."

Olivia has the street-word version of Dean Cameron's educated reflection. I'm finding compassion everywhere I look. On the road again, I make for Times Square, arriving in the rain.

Before I started on this ride, Poetry Man told me, "Listening is making love." He was blessing me for the journey, but I didn't really understand.

"Unicycling is making love," I answered
back that day, but I don't know what I speak,
until today, in Times Square, where I heart-
learn the meaning of preference, my preference

for unicycling, that I am comfortable
with my unicycle as some men
are comfortable with other men,
as I am comfortable with women,

as I am comfortable with a woman named Anne.
Times Square at rush hour, in the rain,
unicycling. Each nerve of me electric,
totally, completely absorbed in my own every motion,

totally, completely absorbed in the merge of Broadway
and 7th, neon panels stretching hundreds of feet

above my intense concentration, gold and honking
streams of taxis swishing their tires

in an endless procession
on this shining wet road,
geometries of people make lines of motion
from beneath umbrellas. Each pedal forward

confirms the organic connection between my insides
and everything surrounding. Making love. Inches separate my line between life and death. This is no stroll through Central Park, no casual encounter between rubber

and road. Out of the square, like a kayak
finding still water after rapids, I know now
this orgasmic joy, how unicycling is making love.
A mile later, still glowing from Times Square,

I pay the price for the twelve miles
of loops I rode in yesterday's parade. My pedal
wobbles out of a stripped crank socket on 37th Street
and 7th Avenue. Stranded, I begin walking.

"That's a big damn wheel," says a big black man at 34th street. "Show me how you ride that thing."

"My pedal's broken," I explain, and we start a conversation about my tour.

His comment for my journey: "Let them be. I don't judge. God will judge."

"What do you think God will judge?"

"I don't pretend to know how God will judge. No one's ever come back to say what God does."

I give a try at his own language. "Maybe Jesus came back to tell us to love one another?"

He looks at me, then he grabs my shoulder. "That's it. That's it exactly." He says these words as if he's sensing a new way past the contradictions between love and judgment. We say a few more words then continue in our opposite directions. "Ride strong." He blesses me as we part ways. Whatever truth there is to the stereotype of African-American disapproval of queer life, I keep running into exceptions.

As I walk the crowded streets, I think back on this day of conversation and discovery. Dean Cameron's words come back to me over and over again. I feel real physical relief when I recall what he shared. What a balm, what a contrast to the simplistic judgmentalism of so much Christianity today. I could sit all day in his presence, hearing him explain the core Christian principles of love, compassion, diversity, and inclusion; hearing him describe how hard this journey always has been and always will be, hearing him commend everyone to walk or pedal a road of compassion for the bettering of our world. When I find a guide to trust, my journey feels more possible.

After Big Man slaps my shoulder farewell, I keep walking my unicycle home toward Clay, through these big crowds of Manhattan. On 16th St. a bright voice speaks at me from the level of my handlebars.

"How do you get on that thing?" Her eyes shine out from behind intricate dreadlocks, her ebony face the kind magazine covers love. We are walking in the same direction, but when I explain my ride, our sentiments diverge.

"Black and white. Homosexuality is wrong," she says.

"Why do you say that?"

"I was raised in a Christian family, and there is no question. That's wrong."

"What about other verses," I ask, "like about cutting hair, not mixing cloth types, not eating pork?"

"I don't do a single one of those," she answers with an "I-dare-you" smile.

"What about equal rights?" I take her dare, mostly because I like her voice and enjoy seeing her smile.

"Gay marriage is wrong." She looks about to walk on ahead, then comes closer.

"Personally I don't have a problem with gays if they just keep to themselves."

I tell her about the two men I met yesterday at the parade, together for fifty years, married just last year. "Equal rights?" I ask. "Inheritance?" I explain their joy that they are now automatically listed as next of kin. "And visitation? Would it be fair if you had a

same sex partner, but when you got really sick your parents could forbid your partner to visit you?"

"That would be wrong. The state should keep out of that."

"As it stands now, most states have no laws protecting the right of visitation for same-sex partners. The state would have to get involved to ensure that right."

"That's wrong," she repeats, and then, to my complete surprise, the conversation turns.

"I've had a gay lover," she says softly.

I keep walking my unicycle down 7th Avenue, not saying a word for many steps, not wanting to wreck this moment. At last, just above the din of traffic, I ask her, "Was that a good experience?"

"Oh yes. That was a real good experience. But I know it was wrong." I ask her what she means.

"That's what my parents and my grandparents taught me. That's what my church taught me."

"But the relationship was good?"

"Yes, it felt complete in a way I can't describe. Different from any man I've ever been with, but I couldn't explore it."

In these few sentences we leap past the judgmentalism of her first words. Fresh from my visit at Union Theological Seminary, I press on. "What if I told you some religious leaders do condemn homosexuality, but many of them understand same-sex attraction as natural? They support caring relationships regardless of the partners' genders. Would that be interesting to you?"

"That would be interesting."

She points a block ahead to where she'll be turning left. At the corner we talk another minute. "So," she says. "Equal Rights?"

"I think so."

We exchange names. Crystal heads down 13th Street and I walk straight onwards, marveling at the honesty of sidewalk encounters. Yesterday Jen and Ann and I had interviewed another woman, twice Crystal's age, who turned out to be questioning her sexual identity.

"It's okay for men to be gay," she'd said, "but it's wrong for women." Somewhere she'd read about men having a gay gene,

but not women. After the interview, she ended up walking with us for a block, asking questions the whole time.

Dean Cameron's words come back again, how simplistic answers are attractive, and feel easier, but how understanding and compassion are what the world needs. Dean Cameron is the antidote I need for so much of the simplistic judgment, which comes from many religious leaders, which squashes honest questions.

"Love the sinner. Hate the sin."

"The Bible condemns homosexuality."

"Homosexuals will be the moral ruin of America."

"Homosexuals will go to hell."

It takes longer to skip the sound bytes,
to hear life stories until they come alive,
and to work instead on weaving the rich
tapestry of compassion and understanding.

Compassion looks for less preaching
and more listening, more believing,
more doing, following the crazy
Christian, human, worldly belief that no person

in this world matters more than any other,
and no person in this world matters less.
Thank God for Dean Cameron
and all like him who salt earth

with possibilities for justice.
Thank God for five-foot Crystal

and for 7th Avenue in Manhattan.
After forty blocks and directions

from a dozen people, I finally find a bike shop to get me ready for tomorrow's departure. A bike shop employee loans me a tool overnight, trusting me, an out-of-towner, with an expensive pedal wrench. “Just slide it under our door if you leave town before we're open.” Listening is making love. I see better now how these words are true.

Two weeks into gay America. So far I’ve traveled 434 miles. Jen and Ann flew back to Seattle earlier in the day. Clay is out late with his volleyball team, and I go to bed before he returns. I’ll wake up tomorrow morning, alone, once again not knowing my next destination.

Chapter Thirteen

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

THREE YEARS AGO the heat challenged me in New Jersey, but as I enter the state today I feel like a boiling radiator. Most of this day I ride on the same highways I unicycled for my 50-state ride. At 11:00 a.m. I stop inside Dunkin' Donuts for iced decaf, sip it slowly, and stare out the window at the baking hot pavement. Finishing the coffee, I order a second one and stall awhile longer before returning to the scorching pavement. By noon I have to stop riding every three to five miles because my legs turn noodly and my body feels on the verge of boiling over.

I rest under tree shade, inside convenience stores, wherever I can find a chance to lower my body temperature. Rain was falling when I started from Manhattan this morning at six. It stopped by the time I reached New Jersey, but the humidity still feels like 100

percent. Temperature displays on bank signs all read 95 degrees. Crawl stroke or butterfly, I can't decide the best way to cut through this ocean of heavy air.

Even as I play leapfrog with my internal thermostat, I ask people about queer rights in America today—two police officers, a gas station attendant, and a woman walking her dog who gives me directions. At one of my tree-shade cooling stops a young man comes out, curious about my unicycle. He tells me he's "vociferous" about queer rights. "My best friend's mom is a lesbian. She's done fine here in Jersey, but now she's moving to Mississippi. I'm worried how she'll be treated."

A man from India stops his car in front of me and brings his three children out to show them my unicycle. "Look at this," he exclaims in wonder, asking questions, explaining to his kids about what he hears from me, trying to make them understand our encounter. The kids stand back, disengaged from their father. When I tell him the purpose of my ride and ask my question, he looks surprised, then ponders, and finally speaks. "There is a human being in everyone who must always be respected. We must never forget this."

He asks me my reasons for doing this tour and then turns his attention back to my unicycle, trying again to raise the attention of his kids.

"Look Dad!" his son exclaims, finally interested. The boy points ahead to where a Ferrari roars to merge with street traffic. Priorities.

All day I hope for a phone call offering a place to stay. I've left messages with the local PFLAG organization and with Princeton University's office of gay and lesbian affairs.

In the end I get a call from a religious seminary on my route. The man on the phone asks some questions, trying to make sense of this ride. He's a director on campus and invites me to stay in campus housing. "We've got a theological conference this week and a preaching conference too. You can come and listen to the open sessions if you'd like."

Gold mine. Almost everyone I've talked with, believer or not, inside of church or outside, happy or frustrated with their spiri-

tual life, sticking with or moving on from organized church, lets me know religion is at the heart of queer rights. I've been wondering how to contact pastors and get these stories. Now I have an answer.

Arriving on campus after two more overheated rest stops, a lemonade, a cola, and a water, I step gratefully into the air-conditioning. "Here's your key," greets the student at the front desk, giving me directions to my room. "And here's the schedule."

Hot muggy air takes such energy to push through with One Wheel. Exhausted, I take a shower and fall asleep. Even after a thirty-minute nap, I wake up weary.

Brownstone buildings, manicured lawns, and shade trees surround me as I walk across the seminary grounds. The director finds me and asks if I'd like to meet some gay pastors. "Of course," I reply.

"Don't ask; don't tell," says pastor A65, a Presbyterian. "That's our policy." I give him a cover number for my writing, even though he tells me, "I'm pretty free to talk about being gay. I serve a congregation near San Francisco. They know I'm gay and the senior pastor is supportive. I work with the national group for full inclusion in the Presbyterian church."

"Don't ask. Don't tell," says pastor B32, a Methodist. He needs this cover number to hide his identity. Much of his life is a disguise. "If I'm discovered as a gay person, I'll be finished—even if I continue to be celibate. My church assumes if we're gay, we're having sex."

A straight Lutheran pastor, F93, tells of how she came to be an ally. I give her a cover number, too. She appears to have nothing to hide, but who knows? I feel the weight of difference amongst these pastors who keep disguises and those who can live openly. F93 tells me her story.

"I believed the scriptures were against homosexuality, and I was convinced gays were pushing a radical agenda. In my senior year I got a phone call from a religious anti-gay group. They were signing people up for their advocacy list, and the caller was assuming I agreed with him. It was so judgmental I ended up defending gay rights to that guy. I suddenly realized the implica-

tions of what I'd been saying and believing all my life. That was the beginning of my becoming an ally."

A Canadian pastor, X18, tells me of the transgender organist who serves their congregation, of how seven of ten provinces have approved gay marriage, and of how gay marriage will soon be the law of the land, "yet 55% of Canadians still disapprove."

A Presbyterian from Massachusetts, P46: "I'm stuck in a conflict. My state legalized gay marriage last year, but my church has not approved participating in gay marriage ceremonies. I haven't been asked yet to officiate a gay wedding. When the time comes, I don't know what I'll do."

"Don't ask. Don't tell." These words usually apply to the military, where the policy has existed since President Clinton tried and failed to open the services to full participation for queer people. Since that policy was put in place, more queer officers and enlisted people have been removed from service than ever before. It feels strange to hear this conference of pastors using the military term, "Don't ask. Don't tell." In the Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches all have held trials to remove queer pastors from their rosters. "Don't ask. Don't tell," in church? The words expose church politics more effectively than they hide queer pastors.

Evening worship at this theological and preaching conference is a further surprise. Every reference to God uses a male pronoun. I expect this when I'm in evangelical or fundamentalist settings, but this is a mainline tradition I've landed in here.

There was a time when I wouldn't have noticed this language or thought it mattered. I grew up with images of God as the great grandpa in the sky, and everything I heard about the big guy upstairs was about the testosterone-being who occupied the heavens.

My wife Anne and many other sensitive teachers have helped me realize the exclusive use of male references to God is not supported by the Bible. For thousands of years, male-only language has existed hand-in-hand with male dominance. It's not many years since we got over writing mankind and switched to humankind.

Anne and other teachers have helped me understand how gender inclusive language matters if we claim to be serious about

women's rights and equal rights. From my seat near the back of the congregation I look around and try to gauge reactions. Many of the participants at this service are women. Surprisingly, no one shows discomfort with this male-biased language.

If Anne had been sitting next to me, she would have whispered comments into my ear. After years of studying and leading women's groups, she's witnessed the power of language and the importance of making God images as broad as possible. She often comes home from leading a women's circle telling me stories of older women hearing female references to God for the first time. Some of these women had given up on church, waiting silently for decades until a place began to open for them.

Queer inclusion. Women's inclusion. Cultural inclusion. Mainline churches like these at this conference, we've struggled with all kinds of inclusion, all kinds of language. Tonight, surrounded by these restrictions and exclusions, I feel more distant than ever from the pulpit I used to preach from every Sunday. Even with the disconnection, I have to admit the only reason I've grown more open is from other people, mostly Christians, thrusting challenge in my face, upsetting the calm waters of my life.

At the morning session, our speaker tells a story about Howard Thurman and his two daughters, living in the time of separate but equal. When they were little, passing by a park, they asked their father if they could play on the swings. The father said no, and they asked why, and he promised to tell them when he got home.

Arriving home he sat with his daughters to explain, saying, "Never forget it takes all the lawyers, all the judges, all the police, and all the businessmen of the state of Florida to keep you two beautiful girls off that little swing. That's how important you are."

Civil rights. Women's rights. Queer rights. At various places along my route, people have made comparisons between these movements for justice. Visiting professor T1180 agrees, "The dynamics are all the same." We make plans for lunch together.

While I wait for noontime, more stories come my way. Pastor C85 studies classic Greek literature. "The Bible says no more about homosexuality than it does about the difference between a Ford and Chevy." He clarifies his words. "Temple prostitution is talked

about in the Bible. And the Greeks had a tradition of same-sex acts between teachers and students. I can agree with the Apostle Paul in condemning coercive same-sex acts. But that's not what we're talking about today. Today people aren't talking about coercion, or prostitution, or pederasty. They're asking for the right to have their love and commitment recognized in marriage."

In a group of people, Methodist D49 tells of serving a "pretty conservative" parish, but "we're only a mile from a college campus, and I want us to be welcoming to students." He talks about the tensions in his church over welcoming queer people, and he doesn't know what to do. Someone suggests he can start with PFLAG. "They're always the nice guys, the ones who will be there to listen and to support."

Noon arrives, and I walk the few blocks into town with T1180. As we eat falafel at a Greek restaurant, this professor tells me, "If there's one thing I'd like for people to know, it is the extraordinary normalcy of the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people."

When I ask her interest in queer justice, she tells me, "Well, that's how I identify." She tells me how the congregation she first served welcomed her, and welcomed her partner, and also welcomed their child. "I was wonderfully surprised."

We talk about our kids for awhile, how fast they're growing up. She tells me more about her life.

"Now I teach at a school where I have no risk from being openly lesbian. Still, I struggle with whether to make a public announcement. On the one hand, it makes sense for me to be out. But if I do, people will reduce me to only one single dimension, as 'that lesbian professor.' I've watched that happen to people in the church, over and over again. I wonder what I ought to do."

She stops for a moment and then continues, "I wish people who want to know about LGBT people would just come to one of our PTA meetings at my child's school. It doesn't make any difference whether the parents are gay or lesbian or heterosexual. We're all there to do the best we can for our children."

I reply, sharing stories of same-sex parents I've met on this ride. "The biggest thing they've told me is not about being queer,

it's about being a parent, about getting their kids to school on time, and working to raise them well."

"Keep riding," she tells me when we've finished lunch. "It makes a difference for a straight person to be out collecting and telling LGBT stories. I'll follow the rest of your ride."

After lunch I check the front desk. My new pedal cranks have arrived. Unicycle.com overnighted a pair of 4.5-inch cranks to replace the ones I broke in the Pride Parade. If my whole unicycle broke into pieces, they could ship a brand new one overnight.

A bike shop in town loans me tools to change the cranks. B32 finds me after I get back to school. "Hey, you want to come stay at my house tonight? I need a break from this conference, and you'd be welcome."

We've already been talking. He's one of the few African-American pastors here. I've told B32 how many African-American queer people I've met on this trip, and how surprising this seems to me, given how much I've heard about the African-American community looking down on homosexuality.

"In the 1940's and 50's it was OK to have gay couples living in your neighborhood after they were rejected from white homes. There was almost a sense of solidarity, everyone being rejected by white society. That ended after civil rights. The black community worried about our women becoming weak, about couples not having children. You say you've seen a lot of gay and lesbian black people. But have you asked what their family relationships are? Have you asked how many of them choose between their lovers and their families?"

We leave seminary at five in the afternoon, and he drives me twenty miles north to where he rents a room in a friend's home. She and B32 both have dogs. They seem the best of friends, and when she talks about someday finding a man again, B32 replies, "Just as long as you don't find the same guy I'm interested in."

On a drive after dinner, B32 shows me the community where he works, especially the people in poverty he spends so much time with. He describes his work here. After a bit he begins telling me about the year he lived in East Africa.

"How is it for a person to be gay there?"

"You can get stoned for being gay in the country I lived in," he answers. "But they've got their customs too. Homosexuality there is not about a relationship, it's about the act of sex. If you have sex and you're on top, then you're not gay. You're only gay if you're receiving on the bottom."

B32 has questions of me too. "Was your family always a 'perfect' family when you were out in public?"

"Yes."

"And were things different at home?"

"Yes."

"That explains how you can be open to LGBT people. You recognize that underneath the surface, there's a lot of turmoil."

B32. Wise man. How does he know I've been thinking of these things for years, how my family, my faith, my experiences have fit together to make me who I am? I fall asleep reviewing these connections in my mind. I'll think them through again when I get back to seminary.

In the morning B32 drives us back to school. The morning session is a Bible study on the Psalms of lament. Afterward, there's a meeting led by the week's presenters. Asking if I can sit in, I receive a welcome to this group of a dozen people. We're in a meeting room with deep carpet and formal chairs, a place exuding the tradition of this seminary. The conversation is about the Psalms. I listen for twenty minutes, then raise my hand to speak.

After a three-sentence introduction of my ride, I tell them, "These days here have been the most tiring of my whole tour. And yesterday I barely pedaled anywhere. I don't know if you want to speak to this or not, but everywhere else on my tour, I've been able to repeat the stories I've heard from people."

I take a breath and continue quietly. "When I come here to a seminary, though, I can't tell the stories I'm hearing. 'Don't ask. Don't tell.' If I share the stories of these pastors, some of them will be in danger of losing their positions." Two people respond gently, with words about patience and the long process of change. As they do I feel myself getting hot. The irony and the injustice surface and I speak again, still quietly, but this time anger comes through.

"How can this be? We talk about theology and truth all the time as Christians. We're talking about Psalms this week, but we make people hide their truth if they want to be part of church." I pause, "What the fuck is going on?" The word slips out. Theology is what I care enough to swear for.

Silence. Someone says a few words. Then another person shifts the conversation back to the Psalms. When we break for lunch, the director finds me.

"We've got to talk." He looks concerned. "I invited you to spend the night, and now you've spent two nights here. I invited you to attend the open sessions, but you showed up at a closed session. And now you're filming interviews with people. I need to know what you're up to."

"That was a closed session? I asked people if I could sit in, and they said yes. If I'd known it was closed, I never would have gone," I apologize repeatedly, truly appreciative of his welcome to me, sorry for my unintentional slip.

"Did someone talk to you about my comments at that meeting?"

"Three people already."

" I was talking about the 'Don't ask. Don't tell.' policies. And I swore."

"I heard. Some people's impression of their whole week at this conference will now be colored by your comments. You were welcome here, but Lars, you've crossed a line."

I apologize twice more, and I tell him I'll be leaving after three brief interviews when Tan arrives. I answer his questions about the interviews, and when he understands what we'll be doing, he agrees. Again he says, "You've crossed a line."

Two hours later, interviews finished, I hurry back onto the road, grateful to churn my legs southward, pushing my unsettled spirit back toward the rhythm of the ride.

One piece of me always agonizes over causing disturbance. "Why didn't you just keep your mouth shut? Why can't you learn this?" I ask myself as I turn pedals.

Yet, even as I mouth this question to myself, a second part of me remembers mutations, how often Jesus himself spoke offensive terms and how he found his comfort far from society's center.

Martin Luther of my own tradition came off caustic too. "Why," I ask myself more questions, "do some church people get so riled about bad language but have such long patience for bad theology? Why do some churchers get so upset about a display of anger but so little maddened by the injustices of our culture and our world?"

Riding south from town, I realize the truth of the director's words—I have "crossed a line." Although church gives little encouragement for straying out of bounds, we venerate some of those who have: Martin Luther King Jr, Desmond Tutu, Jesus. My faith makes increasingly better sense from outside of the church structure than it does from inside.

I may never grow comfortable with the process, but crossing the line makes me who I am. B32's words about my family come back to me, and I start thinking about what made me this way. Whether they gave me the job or whether I took on the role myself doesn't matter, but my main childhood task centered on doing the communication between Mom and Dad. On warm spring days Mom would shout from the kitchen door to the garage that lunch was ready. Rare was the day a reply came back. I'd head out to Dad with news that the table was spread, then bring back word of how long until he reached a break in his project. I remember contentious decisions about new carpet, a new roof, another used car. My mom and dad knew each other's triggers well. Instinctively, unconsciously, I understood my role—keep the family functioning.

Growing up I experienced how little a marriage certificate means, but how much relationship matters. When it came time for Anne and me to probe married life, I had no hesitation about living together, exploring relationship as best we could before we sought official papers.

Anne's parents didn't want her living with me before she got married. They were a "Don't ask. Don't tell." family. They wouldn't make the trip from Iowa to California for a visit until

after we became engaged. Anne was her family communicator too, but it took a long time for her to learn the family secrets, a long time to understand the dynamics of depression that weave through her family. Her aunt and uncle cared for her during the summer of her seventh year, while her mom received electro-shock therapy for depression.

Anne tells how all during her childhood she would wake up and create a list of reasons to get up for the day. If she had events to look forward to, she could keep the depression away. She learned the family secret when she was in her twenties. She was in counseling then, very insecure, very underweight, slowly putting together the missing pieces of her life. That was when she learned her grandmother had committed suicide. She learned it had happened when her own mother was seven. She made the connection that she'd been the same seven years of age, a generation later, spending summer with her aunt and uncle, during her mother's hospitalization and treatment. She credits that counselor with helping her get past, "Don't Ask. Don't Tell." She credits that counselor with saving her life.

I suppose if some people had known the issues Anne and I carry in our lives, they might have cautioned us about pursuing our relationship. Or I suppose we could have done the "Don't ask. Don't tell" with each other, pretending everything was fine. Instead we followed the advice of poet Robert Bly and a line he wrote, "Where your greatest wound is, there you will find your greatest blessing."

When I turned 29, in the year after we were married, I entered counseling. The "Garchen Route," I told my counselor. "That was my childhood journey while I was growing up. I was always trying to bring the garage and the kitchen together." I discovered how much of a fixer I had become in all my endeavors, whether with people or issues. I was always trying to analyze situations and bring the disparate parts together into some new harmony, surrogate efforts to make my mom and dad love each other. Whether there was any hope of change didn't matter to me. After all my years of growing up, fixing was an automatic reflex.

"Fixing can be a good skill," my counselor had told me. "But if that's the only thing you ever do then you're not acting, you're just reacting."

It took me awhile to understand what my counselor invited me to consider. Having only my single fix-it response to any situation was similar to "Don't Ask. Don't Tell." The Garchen Route energy I directed toward Mom and Dad never considered other possibilities, such as them not living together. By forcing every situation into a fix-it pattern, I couldn't be honest or open to other ways of seeing the world.

Toward the end of that half-year of counseling work, I wrote a letter to my mom and dad, resigning from the job of family communicator. I don't know if they remember it. Who knows the trail of cause and effect? Two years later my mom moved out and the separation finalized in divorce.

When KariAnna turned seven, Anne and I remembered with each other the stories of her summer away, of her mother, and of her grandmother's suicide. We talked. We told. Our family made it through that year. We hope the spell of that secret has been broken, and the wound may offer us a blessing.

Inside me lives some strange combination of
peacekeeper and challenger, appeaser and provocateur.

I have loads of compassion for those who don't fit
rules. My own childhood was spent trying to fill
in the words for the rules of marriage
that were not working.

I have little patience for those who hold tighter
to rules than relationships. I always suspect
there's something more beneath the veneer.
My childhood job shaped everything.

The director who said, "You've crossed a line," has his own story, his own formation to make him who he is. Instead of pedaling away, maybe I should be back there talking to him, hearing his story, getting beneath our masks. I know he is also an advocate,

working for justice from inside the institution of the church. I'm sure we'd have stories to share. Right now, though, I need this road time, this space, to let these experiences settle.

Others have stories too. Those who are following my ride by e-mail start writing back almost as soon as I send out my seminary story update.

> I found your "don't ask - don't tell" comments especially stirring. You see, my folks treat my partner and me respectfully....but don't want to talk about any issues or anything involving our lifestyle. As if the only thing that makes this a lesbian/homosexual relationship is the sex! Sometimes I want to scream from the mountaintops that this is my life partner, the one whom I love with all my heart and soul! I want to do that to make sure I still exist. If you don't talk about your life, and your spiritual life, you can lose yourself. I spent too many years trying to deny who I was by drinking, taking drugs, and running around, and wondering if God really did love me too.
>
> It took ten years to fully accept who I was and that I was loved by God. I say let's look at Jesus. He reached out to all people, and he was considered a radical then. Imagine if he would come to us today. I don't have to imagine—I look around and try to see Jesus in the people I meet everyday, especially those that aren't included. People think that's radical, even my Christian brothers and sisters.
>
> Just my thoughts. I truly believe the only way to be heard is to keep telling the stories. Blessings on your ride, especially in this heat!

Hetero-flexible Sara writes me from Vermont,

> As I told you when you visited, I feel I have lost my voice in this fight for justice because I am now perceived as a lesbian. As a straight woman, married with four children, I possessed power in this culture and I DID use my power for good especially as my state struggled with the civil union issues – I stood up for justice at church, at school and in my social community and I felt heard and my opinion respected. It has been

> the hardest part of my "transition" into being in a non-straight relationship. Now my voice seems self-serving, distorted. To me it feels like those horrible dreams where you are screaming and no sound comes out of your mouth – and now I am not watching from the sidelines, now it is MY children, my family they are talking about…

The disconcerting feeling about someone telling me I've crossed a line is how it puts the question to my own experiences. Am I getting a big enough picture to know that my words are worth something? Why do queer people and gay pastor stories make more sense to me than the judgments of institutions and traditions? Pedaling these last miles in New Jersey, on "the other side of the line," I feel insecure. Everything feels open to question again. My stomach churns.

Chapter Fourteen

Saying and Believing

CROSSING the line
into Pennsylvania, I enter my sixth
state: Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut,
New York, New Jersey, and now Pennsylvania.

Gay pride parade in New York. Seminary
in New Jersey. State officials in Vermont.
A different home each day. A different bed
each night. Conversations. Word upon word

upon word, little levers, prying up experiences
of queer life in America today.
Don't Ask? Don't Tell?
I'll ask. I'll tell.

Pedaling away from the seminary, breathing hot humid air, pushing my legs hard, the last two days start falling into perspective, seeking their place among the stories and the people of my life. Slowly, I regain balance, knowing I have come far enough now that no abstract arguments about the evils of homosexuality or its dangers to society, or its threat to religion, can take away the many queer intersections that have so far graced my ride.

My odometer clicks five hundred miles. The thousand-mile goal still feels possible. I still carry energy for listening. I worried about turning angry or rabid in my advocacy for queer rights, responding to the cascade of stories from this ride. I know my tendencies. The "Don't Ask. Don't Tell" days feel like a test. Now the miles begin to restore my patience. I feel ready for more stories.

Just an hour ago, back in New Jersey, I received my destination for tonight. A Quaker justice organization returned my message after I left the seminary. One conversation led to another and now I'm heading for Levittown, America's first planned suburb.

Brothers Alfred and William Levitt had the idea: tracts of houses, affordably built, land on corners set aside for stores and churches. Within ten weeks of building their first two exhibit homes, the Levitt's had sold 3000 orders and scrambled to construct the homes at the rate of 200 per week. Suburbia began here in 1952 and has swept the country ever since.

Getting to this strange landmark looks easy according to the map I check after crossing into Pennsylvania. The ride becomes a challenge when the road I'm riding ends abruptly. I start pedaling miles through forested undeveloped land, riding on a little-used highway, guessing my directions. Tan is driving alongside of me, catching up at photo-op corners for background footage. She doesn't have a local map either. I keep angling toward where I believe I'll find Levittown. Finally, two men in a construction truck tell me I'm close.

Michael, the priest at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, has offered space for the night. He also provides room for a weekly gathering of gay youth. As he shows us their brightly decorated room he tells us, "I wish you could have been here yesterday when they were meeting."

"You can sleep in here," he offers. Comfortable pillows are strewn around the room. "Or you can bring some cushions over to that room." He points, "It's the only one with air-conditioning."

We arrived here late and we are ready for bed, but we talk for a while. St. Paul's is freedom for Michael. He's gay, and like most places in the Episcopal church, he's welcome to serve here as an openly gay clergy person. But he's only recently arrived from Pittsburgh where he served his first year as a priest. "That was tough."

The Pittsburgh diocese is one of just a few regional jurisdictions in the country that has organized to actively protest the appointment of Gene Robinson as Bishop in New Hampshire. Bishop Robinson serves as the first openly gay partnered bishop in the Episcopal church. The election in 2003 caused a worldwide stir in the Episcopal Church. Some parishes left their denominations, but most bishops have been more patient. As a brand new priest, gay Michael ended up in a challenging position. Priests in Pittsburgh were asked to denounce the appointment of Bishop Robinson. All of this caused conflict for Michael, as he wove a narrow path between his own convictions and his commitments to the Episcopal Church.

When I ask him about this time and what he believes is going on across our country today, Michael responds without hesitation, "When we are fearful, we can be manipulated."

He goes on to tell about his move to Levittown. "I love this parish, and I love my diocese. We're very diverse; economically, socially, and with regards to sexual orientation. I've only been here nine months, but I have a lot of dreams to live out here." He walks us through the building with bright eyes, showing us his visions. Michael tells how the worshipping attendance dropped from 130 down to 30 people over the years. "But we're back up to 60 or 70 already. It's all about the right theology. The gospel is about developing a wider and wider embrace of other people.

"One new family told me they're choosing this church exactly because we are diverse. This is the type of environment they want their children to grow up in."

After showing us the kitchen and bathroom, Michael heads home and leaves us to our first night of church camping. Tan

phones Jen, "Guess what! I'm sleeping in a church!" She makes it sound like Disneyland. For me, walking past Michael's office door, I remember years of work.

Morning comes quickly. I try to leave quietly, but Tan wakes. "See you in Philadelphia," I whisper, and she falls back asleep. Another 5:00 a.m. start. I head out into my favorite time of riding. The roads haven't yet clogged with traffic, and the air has enough coolness to make the first two or three hours comfortable. Philly lies 25 miles ahead.

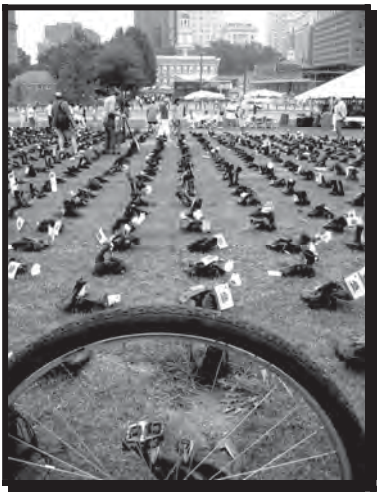
This metropolitan approach turns out different from New York City. Traffic increases the closer I get to downtown, but so does poverty. Areas like this come with warnings about violence, color and race. Passing through on One Wheel, people shout greetings to me. I ride without fear, but still, I don't feel comfortable enough to pull out my camera to start taking pictures, to focus on the poverty, to show how affected I feel by the disarray of Frankfort road. I'd have to ride the miles again to count, but I guess every tenth rowhouse is abandoned and crumbling. Not even boarded up, I pass gaping windows and doorways. The brick rubble looks like TV footage of war-bombed communities. What's it like to grow up here? I have no idea.

The words of Sidewalk Girl from North Hampton come back to me. "It's all about class."

I had plenty of class advantage to avoid this childhood, not like the thirty percent of school children back in Trenton who are homeless. People ask me why I'm riding Straight Into Gay America instead of some other bigger cause. I answer that queer justice is what I have experience with. The truth is the big picture scares me; how do you engage globalization, climate change, environment and economic fairness. How do you help ancient religions adapt to a modern world? How do you drain an ocean? I have to hope T1180, back at seminary, is right. "The dynamics are all the same." I have to trust that compassion anywhere is a good thing for compassion everywhere.

Words from another professor come back to me from years before, from Mark Allen Powell's presentation on welcoming queer people into our churches. Explaining how so many queer people think the church hates them, he advised, "If we have to shut our

churches down for ten years, and go into the streets to tell homosexual people Jesus loves them, we should do it." When I heard Professor Powell saying those words, he was challenging a group of 80 pastors. This morning, riding through this poverty I hear Powell's words applying also to this poverty: Church belongs on the street.



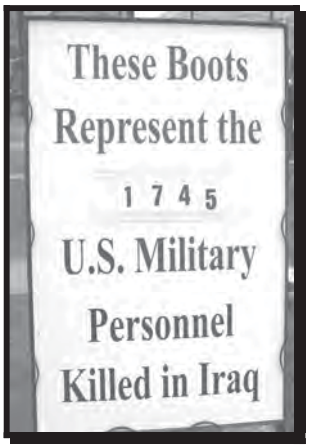
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Eyes Wide Open Exhibit.

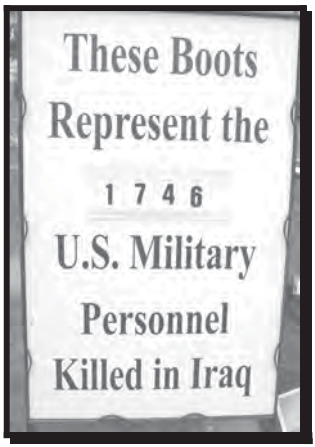
In Philadelphia, in the distance of a few blocks, I cross from ruined rowhouses to national monuments. The Liberty Bell, the Constitution, and the names of Benjamin Franklin and national heroes fill this air. The images look beautiful, but they jar me. I have come upon these monuments slowly, through neighborhoods of poverty and racial and sexual discrimination. If these national treasures are tributes to such a great country, why can't we decide to keep children in warm homes? Arriving on One Wheel, sweating from summer heat, is different from arriving by

jetliner or interstate, landing directly in air-conditioned insulated comfort to see only glory. My journey sees scars.

Today on the lawn of the Liberty Bell Visitor Center, 1,745 pairs of boots create dozens of perfect lines, marking the death of each American soldier in Iraq. Thicker columns of civilian shoes, stacked and nameless, recognize the 30,000 or 100,000 or God only knows what number of uncounted, unrecorded, civilian deaths have happened since the invasion of Iraq. "Eyes Wide Open" is the name of this display, put on by the American Friends Service Organization. I talk with Marq Anderson, the leader of this project.

"I've got a side project going," he tells me. "I'm gay myself. I'm trying to find out how many of these soldiers were gay or lesbian. If ten percent of us are gay, then maybe a hundred-and-fifty of these soldiers were gay."





Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. War Deaths.

Later in the day, walking by the Visitor Center again, the sign announcing the number of dead has changed from 1,745 to 1,746. Another family is now grieving. On a nearby lawn, a demonstration is beginning by the Avenging The Ancestors Committee (ATAC.) According to their research, the exact site of the Liberty Bell Monument is a location where George Washington once kept slaves. The group wants recognition of this history included in the monument displays.

Patriots celebrate our nation's freedom to protest. Protestors protest the limitations on this right. How do we feel each other's scars when our spiritual, political, and cultural lives are filled with so much air-conditioning, so much insulated comfort?

At a park bench, resting in hot air, I talk with a Park Ranger, a toothless old African-American man sitting on the next bench. We can see monuments from where we sit. I ask him about queer rights.

"It's up to them how they want to live their lifestyle...
And yes, they should have equal rights."
He points to Independence Hall across
the street, "That's what we fought for."

"Why?" I ask, as I do more and more
frequently. "Why do you think
this is such a hot and polarizing
issue in our country today?"

Sometimes people tell me the issue
is sex. Others blame the media.
Most say they have no idea.
This elder says simply,

"There's a lot of difference
between *saying* and *believing*."

Standing in a public restroom, facing the wall, the man two stalls down asks if he saw me unicycling yesterday in Jersey. Turns out he did. I hear about his nephew, 25 years with AIDS,

dad violently opposed; but when the choice came down to keeping or losing his son, he chose the relationship. "I'm glad," says the man, zipping his pants, "they finally reconciled."

Twenty minutes later we're talking with Roger, a man who's seen a lot of AIDS, a priest who understands life and loss. Tan and I find him at The Church of St. Luke and The Epiphany Episcopal Church. He chides my Lutheran background when I meet him, "You have a bit of catching up to do," he laughs. Serving here since the 1980's, he's seen the AIDS crisis through and the development of the Philadelphia "Gayborhood." A gay man himself, he reports, as Michael did last night, how many families appreciate an inclusive place to help raise their children.

"We used to be almost solely a gay church, back in the 80's. Our ministry was all about surviving the AIDS crisis, comforting the living, and burying the dead. Now we have more members of all kinds, more straight families, more individuals who aren't gay."

Roger smiles all the time. He seems to savor being gay.

"I'm happy," he tells me. "I'm happy to be gay. And yes, I'm pro-gay."

"How do you define that?"

"Pro-gay means providing whatever it takes for GLBT people to be safe and accepted. Pro-gay is not a detriment to straight folks."

He's just returned from a four-month sabbatical, in search of next steps for his life. "I went away to put to rest the last twenty years of ministry. My life has been so involved in working through the destruction of the AIDS crisis. I needed time away to honor those experiences and those people. Now I'm figuring out what's next for my ministry here."

This Philadelphia parish, and the people he spends time with, have his focused attention. But he also serves on the national organization dealing with issues of human sexuality. I ask his thoughts on the future of the Episcopal Church.

"People worry about the church splitting. We're not splitting. We're already over the hump on inclusion. From the national gathering I have this vivid picture of listening to a delegate, standing at the microphone, ranting about the evils of homosexuality.

And I remember looking past the speaker at the hundreds of people seated behind him. The vast majority of those people, they understand inclusion. The Episcopal Church has arrived when it comes to inclusion.

"One thing I worry about," he continues, "is all the focus on marriage. I'm positive about gay marriage for people, but I don't want to lose the gift of singleness. I'm forty and I have very close friendships. How many straight married guys even know what this means?"

I ask Roger why he thinks the Episcopal Church is doing well with inclusion. He confesses, "The Episcopal church is traditionally an upper class church. We've got a large number of wealthy and influential people. When we're at our best, we understand we have an obligation to serve, an obligation to be a voice for the gospel."

On our way out, Roger walks us to the sidewalk and points to the next corner. "They've got the best Philly Cheese Steaks."

After sandwiches we meet Dian at the Congregation Beth Ahovah, a Jewish Synagogue. "Until a year ago," Dian says, "I was the only straight person in this congregation. Then I got a friend to join." She talks about visiting 25 years ago, when the congregation was just five years old. "The day I first visited, I felt more comfortable here than anywhere else. I've been active ever since. We have children. We have couples. We have single people. It's a great community."

A copy of the Beth Ahovah newsletter catches my eye, celebrating the 30th anniversary of the congregation. I read of a member describing the difference between being a gay-friendly congregation versus a gay congregation like this one. "With so many gay people here, we can talk about other things, like cooking."

This day is stove-top hot. A seven-dollar downtown milkshake barely makes a dent toward refreshment. Tan and I continue our tour. Families, individuals, everyone I ask, respond that queer people deserve equal rights. "Yes," says a young lawyer on her bike. We pedal together for a few blocks. "I live in the gayborhood, and I love it."

For dinner my friend Nathan has driven in from Reading to visit. His girlfriend lives here in Philly, and she offers an invita-

tion to stay at her home. "I've got a futon," Maura offers, "if that will do." By the time we finish talking, we decide to stay at Maura's tonight, and at Nathan's tomorrow. I'll ride through Amish country to Lancaster. From there Tan will give me a ride up to Nathan's home. So far I'm finding a host every night, a welcome surprise each time things work out.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Maura and Nathan.

Tonight Tan and I end up sleeping on the same small futon. "This OK with you?" I ask.

"Sure," she replies without hesitation, "You're a straight pastor. I'm a lesbian. No problem."

I laugh. "If I move too much, just push me off the bed."

"Don't worry. All my brothers and sisters and me, we all slept in the same bed when I was growing up."

Tan has told me pieces of her story, about being a boat person leaving Vietnam with her family at the end of the war. She's told me about the boat engine failing at sea, of the sixty people landing on a deserted island, and of the rescue by another ship in exchange for almost all the jewelry and savings of the stranded families. Two years ago Tan went back to film her family and the village where she grew up.

At 5:00 a.m. the next morning, I wake up. Tan has not pushed me off the bed. I sneak out quietly, ready to ride west. Maura lives in a poor section of town, I'm sure as much by choice as by need. She's a lawyer, working in the Public Defender office, one of those people who got into law for service rather than riches. She's already shared how her intense interest in queer rights heightened even more when her younger brother let the family know he is gay.

Past more abandoned buildings, I pedal out Lancaster Road to reach Hwy 30, surprised again how a single street is all that separates devastated rowhouses from expansive manicured homes. Stark contrasts.

The next miles unwind through Bryn Mawr and Devon and other communities, from the high density of the city to these outlying towns, and finally to the beginning of Amish farm country.

Chapter Fifteen

Amish Buggies

NEAR WAGONTOWN, Pennsylvania, three young boys herd milk cows across the street to another pasture. I stop at this farm; it includes a family bakery. Out front the horse stands ready, hitched to the buggy. Kids run around in dark-blue homemade clothes. Girls wear bonnets. The older sister sells the baked goods, jams, and fresh produce. They sneak stares at me and One Wheel, none of them talking unless I ask a question, keeping their traditions despite the stream of Subarus and SUVs arriving from the housing developments that encroach more and more closely on this farm.

"Whoopies," suggests one of the shoppers. "These are great." She points to six pastries wrapped in cellophane. "Like Twinkies, only a dozen times better."

I buy the pack, and as I eat the first of them, the farmer shows up. He's younger than I am, has many more kids than I do, and he talks slow, reminding me of native elders in Nome, adopting the pace of the land.

"How about all this traffic?" I ask, pointing at his customers.

"It helps," he says.

"Seems like a lot of new housing going in nearby."

"Yes," he answers, and we begin a conversation. Paul is his name. "Land here is becoming so valuable. It's getting tough to farm."

He goes on to explain how farmers can put their land in a special tax exemption, but then suffer consequences if they ever sell it for development. He's taken the exemption himself.

"A lot of our community has sold their land here and then moved west to Iowa or Wisconsin to buy cheaper land."

He asks how fast I unicycle.

"Ten miles an hour."

"About the same as my horse. A good horse, though, can do twenty-five miles-an-hour for a couple of miles."

I wait for him to ask about my ride, and when he does I ask him, "What does the Amish church say about homosexuality?"

He's silent for a long time. "My church doesn't approve," he says, and pauses again. "But it is not my right to judge others."

I pause, too. "Do you know people who are gay?"

Slowly again. "Yes, I know people."

Paul doesn't want to say more about these people he knows of. We talk a bit more about farming, and then I get back on One Wheel and return to the road. For a moment there with Paul I felt like I was back in New York City, walking with Crystal, hearing her surprising words about her queer love. Stories are everywhere, even here beneath the careful ordered life of an Amish community. A lesbian friend of mine keeps telling me, "LGBT people are the elephant in the room. The ten percent of us who are gay affect all one hundred percent of our society." The evidence proves her right. "Most of the time we don't get talked about," she says, "but we're there all the time."

A few miles later, eating lunch at the White Horse Inn our server Danielle tells Tan and me she believes in equal rights. "But people around here don't all agree. A lot of people are against it for religious reasons."

When we finish eating she hands me back the tip I've set on the table. "Keep this for a cup of coffee later. I like what you're doing."

At the next table, a retired man eating lunch with his wife puts out his hand to shake mine. "I heard you talking. Equal Rights," he says. "I agree."

When I ride on, the land grows more rural. Amish farms become more common. These Amish are as visible an example of tradition as I expect to find anywhere, their roots forming in those early years of the Protestant Reformation. Like queer culture, their history holds persecution and judgment.

Anabaptists were the forerunners of the Amish. With their emphasis on baptizing only consenting adults, and on forming free-churches in individual homes, Anabaptists conflicted with the more structured churches. Some city-states even hired bounty hunters to arrest these Anabaptists who threatened the order of the day.

Mennonites splintered off from the Anabaptists in 1632. Then in 1693, frustrated that Mennonites were becoming too lax, the Amish formed under the leadership of Jacob Amman. They tightened the discipline of shunning, even prohibiting the spouse of a shunned person from eating or sleeping with his or her partner until the offender reformed.

Along with rigid internal standards, the Amish continued to suffer the external religious persecution so common to minority religious groups. High taxes, high rents, inflation, wars, and the draft, gave more reasons for believers to leave Europe. The first records of Amish immigration to the United States are from 1736 in Berks County, Pennsylvania. In this country, the Amish have been persecuted for their pacifist stance against war. They've even ended up in court over whether their buggies must have reflectors.

After lunch I see the first horses clip-clopping on the road, pulling buggies with bonneted families. When a buggy appears in my rear-view mirror I pull onto a side road and pedal circles until

the horse and driver pass, tucking in behind. I follow at a distance until soon it turns off on a gravel side road, toward a farmhouse where there will be no electricity.

White Horse, Pennsylvania. Amish Country.

No car for this buggy driver, and no electricity, whether he wants it or not. Step beyond the bounds of the system and judgment comes. Amish Paul told me his tradition doesn't condone homosexuality, but it's not his place to judge others. Good for him, but judgment pervades the long history of his tradition. Amish individuals have been shunned internally by their own communities and pressured externally by governments for pacifism and unlit buggies. And before the Anabaptists were hunted for bounty in Europe, Martin Luther received a death sentence for defying the Catholic Church. Later in Luther's career, he himself damned Jews and Turks and sided with the princes during a con-

flict with the peasants. Fifteen hundred years before that, Jesus was crucified.

So much persecution has happened in the name of Jesus and the church. No wonder churches are one of the hardest places for many queer people to enter, even today. We speak the language of love, but we are steeped in the habits of judgment, the patterns of the status quo. Jacob Amman might have been a mutant gene in his time. Just like Martin Luther. Just like Jesus.

Back in Michigan, Professor Lenski showed me about the constant interaction between the standard cells and the mutations. This day of Amish experience makes me feel the power of the status quo. Then another buggy pulls in front of me, shined and fancy. I'm surprised to see electric blinkers, an array of reflectors, and automobile rear view mirrors made to fit the buggy. The driver might be sixteen.

I don't know what an older traditional Amish person might think of being tagged by a unicycle, but I take a chance on the driver of this spit-shined rig, picking up my pace to follow closely. For a full six miles I track him, enjoying the changing cadence of the horseshoes, easing for uphills and tapping faster on the way back down. When he reaches the town of Intercourse he turns on his blinker and stops to wait for traffic in the left turn lane. I grab onto the streetlight post while I wait for the green.

"Thanks," I shout across the lane of traffic.

He smiles. "Where are you riding?"

"Baltimore."

"Good travels," he wishes. He's wearing a burgundy colored shirt—everyone else has been wearing dark blue. The light changes and he makes his left turn.

Perhaps he's just enjoying his year of "running around," an Amish tradition where some young people have time to experiment with the society of "The English" before choosing to commit to the ways of the Amish. Or maybe he has a mutant gene inside, something that will shape him for his whole life. I watch his buggy for a moment before I continue. Whether this young man chooses to stay in his tradition or leave it, he'll be dealing with structures and with judgment. Maybe he's willing to pay the price for stepping outside.

On this Saturday afternoon, Intercourse is jammed with traffic heading for an Amish tourist center: a collection of shops, buggy rides, and food vendors filled with visitors and surrounded by acres of parked cars.

I stop for lemonade, feeling the stark contrast of Amish commercialization compared to my visit at the Whoopie farm earlier in the day. Visitors here come from far and wide. The first two I talk to both speak for gay rights. The third shakes his head, "That's wrong."

I ask him why, and hear as I have so often, the Bible forbids homosexuality. "Can you make two ends of a hose fit together?"

I laugh to myself at his mix-up of the plumbing metaphor.

"Can we film this?" Tan interjects. She has just caught up with me after capturing more country footage.

"No way," he shakes his head. "Media take words and turn them into whatever they want."

I keep talking, surprised when he tells me of having gay and lesbian friends who are every bit as good as his other friends. I tell him about people I met in Vermont who now, because of civil unions have rights to hospital visitation, inheritance, and taxation equality. This time he nods his head affirmatively.

"Yes, everyone should have those rights."

I'm still waiting to find the person on this ride, no matter how loudly they believe homosexuality is wrong, who doesn't also believe at some deep level everyone deserves equal rights. Despite our country's many failings, the idea of equal rights seems deeply planted. The old park ranger at the Liberty Bell had it right when he pointed to Constitution Hall. "That's what we fought for."

Back on the unicycle I leave Intercourse, pedal through a town called Bird-In-Hand, and end up in Lancaster. Tan meets me here so we can drive together up to Nathan's home in Reading. My unicycle barely squeezes into the backseat of her rented Dodge Neon.

A few miles earlier I rode by a hand-painted sign at a buggy repair shop, "Water To Help Cool Your Horse." Now, the air-conditioned car gives welcome relief.

Whenever my travels get me within a few hundred miles of Nathan, he always makes the effort to find me. People remark about my travels, but they are nothing compared to Nathan. He's toured with a traveling theater, earned his Ph.D., directed a public theater and now leads a college theater program in his second teaching position. The journey has had rough places, but he never lost faith in the purpose for his life. Seeing him together with Maura, it seems he's finally reached safe harbor.

Tan has the camera out for dinner. She records film almost every time I eat. "We're going to make you look like a glutton," she laughs. After dinner, she keeps the camera rolling and we talk about queer life in America.

"When we met," says Maura, "that was one of the first things I had to know about Nathan. If he wasn't open to gay people, this relationship wasn't going to work."

"Which is a bit humorous," says Nathan, "with my work in the theater. So much of theater has gay people involved. This goes back to the time of Shakespeare and before."

"Tell me more," I ask, and Nathan enters a half-hour tale of transgender and homosexual history in theater. We're sitting on the porch. Maura and Nathan holding hands, seated together on the swing.

"In Greek times, men had to hang out with men in order to be men. Otherwise your gender could cross. All the old plays had men acting out the women's parts. In Elizabethan times you have men playing women's roles, and then in the Restoration you get women playing men's roles so men could get a glimpse of a woman's legs. These were called "breech roles – breeches parts." You had cross-dressing as a matter of course. Traditionally, actors and actresses were true outsiders to society. This has shaped the history of theater. You wouldn't want to invite an actor into your good home. Only in the last few decades have actors and actresses become cultural icons."

"Look at us. We're the insiders," says Maura. "Here we sit, holding each other's hands, and you're filming us and everything's fine. Everyone celebrates that Nathan and I found each other. It would be a whole different situation if we were two men or two women who fell in love with each other."

Nathan adds a story from his journey. "The partner of one of my colleagues died of cancer. My colleague was very devoted to his partner. He stayed at the hospital at his partner's bedside to care for him. But at the same time he provided for his partner, he had to fight a legal battle in the court to get permission to be with him, and to take care of inheritance, and to secure the right to be his primary caregiver. His partner's parents wouldn't accept my colleague's presence. The conflict became a big legal issue, even though these two men had been together for almost twenty years.

"God, it's hard enough to accompany a person through a hospital stay without fighting a court battle at the same time. Heterosexual couples don't have to worry about this. It's tragic we add this kind of suffering to people's lives when they're going through life and death crises with their loved ones."

"And then," Maura adds, "when death does come to a heterosexual couple, the surviving partner is usually surrounded by the love and care and comfort of family. When a same-sex couple's partner dies, we mostly don't even acknowledge it. The surviving partner often bears the loss alone. Life in the closet ends with death in isolation."

We talk until late. I'm hoping Maura and Nathan are the forerunners of our society a generation from now, a land where this kind of inclusivity and compassion is commonplace. When we're finished, I get a good night's sleep on Nathan's basement futon. Tan takes the upstairs couch. In the morning we wake early, heading back to Lancaster for a morning of church shopping.

Chapter Sixteen

"Love of Jesus"

"LET'S TRY that big Assembly of God Church," I suggest. We have arrived early for the 8:00 a.m. service. I park my unicycle by the front door and walk in to shake hands with the greeters. "You'll have to get permission from the pastor if you're going to film."

"No problem," I answer them. "We'll wait." We take a seat and listen to the band rehearsing *Glory, Glory, Hallelujah*. The military imagery is matched by the band director's heavy hand, stopping the musicians abruptly, over and over again, commanding them as if they're on a training march. I start tensing as I watch her hammer the production together, so instead I talk with people about my ride. People in this church tell me homosexuality is sin. A man in a bright red shirt grimaces when I tell him what I'm riding for.

“I don’t like it,” he says.

I ask him about equal rights. “I’ve never thought about it, but I don’t like it.”

When I describe Greg and Willie, his interest rises, and he repeats, “I've never thought about those things. I don’t like it, but, yes, they should have those rights.“

The pastor arrives just before the start of service, as the huge sanctuary begins to fill. I stand to shake hands with this pin-striped reverend. “I can't give you permission to film,“ he tells us.

I tell him what we're doing, very briefly, and he reiterates his statement. “I would have needed more notice.“ Fair enough. With the polarization between sin and no sin, there’s not much room for trust. I'd hesitate, too, if someone came into my congregation with a camera and a unicycle.

So often I dismiss places like these as centers of religious bigotry. Now, though, I want to be talking with this pastor, with these people. Are there roads that connect us, ways we can understand each other?

“Want to stay?“ I ask Tan.

“Nah, if we can't film, let's get on the road.”

On the way out we meet a woman at the door. She's dressed as finely as all the others here, carrying her Bible to her chest as she makes her way to worship. Somewhere in her 50s, she gives a kind greeting.

“Do you ride that unicycle?”

One question leads to the next, and I get the conversation I seek.

“Bless you for doing this ride," she says. "God loves everybody.”

She goes on to a long description of the sin of homosexuality and how it’s something we should work to overcome. I think during this whole conversation she's assuming I'm gay.

She's a first-grade teacher and has been for many years. “Some of them, you know, I could just tell.”

“Tell what?”

“Well, even when they were kids, I could tell which students were different. And I've kept in contact with many of my stu-

dents. There were some students I believed were gay, and they've turned out to be gay."

When I mention she's making a great argument for people being born with their sexual orientation, she charges right on, holding her Bible with believer's passion, looking imploringly into my eyes.

"All of us sin. I sin. As much as I pray, and as much as I continue to study Scripture, I keep falling short of God's will. But God loves us, and God wants the best for us, and God keeps helping us. That's the most important thing; God always loves us."

She has missed the pastor's welcome and the opening hymn of her worship service. Now she looks ready to skip the whole service to wash me thoroughly with the blood of Jesus. I try a few times to question her, but she veers immediately back to her talking points: Homosexuality is sin. God is love. The faithful can change.

I let her keep assuming I'm homosexual, and I listen to her tell me, so lovingly, so insistently, that faith will allow me to reject my human nature; faith is the magic bullet to become something other than myself.

Her view of the world, and of God, and of the purpose of life is almost exactly opposite to my own striving to become fully human. I try one last time to break through her rhetoric.

"Change?
Do you know
the rate of suicide
for gay people is far higher

than the rest of society?
Do you know depression
and suicide is even higher for those
who go through conversion therapy?"

"That's because they don't have the love of Jesus. They need to be washed in the blood of Jesus."

We're getting nowhere. I don't know how to bridge this chasm. After last words of parting and sincere thanks that

she shared so openly and so clearly, I walk outside and start my day's ride.

“How can that be love?” I start talking to myself as my heart rate rises to the pace of my pedaling. She hangs on to six lines in the Bible more strongly than her lifetime of teaching with young children. Experience doesn’t matter, not even her own. She’s glued to a pattern of rules without permission to question. Heterosexual marriage is the only acceptable option. Her life appears to be a contest— follow enough rules, earn enough of God’s love, and she’ll gain her entrance ticket to heaven.

Gettysburg is my destination today, 60 miles ahead. Skipping church gives more time to think. Through the city streets of Lancaster I ride, then west toward York, continuing for my second day on the Lincoln Highway. Between these two cities, as I ride into the small town of Mountville—another road gift. Vision of Hope Congregation has a sign outside, announcing the sermon.

Mountville, Pennsylvania. Metropolitan Community Church.

Next to the name of the church are three small letters, MCC. I can hardly believe what I see. In this small town, and in this region where Biblical condemnation feels prevalent, my ride rolls into its first church of the Metropolitan Community Church denomination. Known internationally for its focus on queer inclusion, the denomination started in Los Angeles in 1968. Ever since then, the MCC has been growing and providing affirmation that Christian faith and homosexuality can exist together. The front door is open, and church starts in forty minutes, and yes, I'm welcome, and yes Tan can film. "Just don't film anyone without permission. A lot of our members still live in the closet."

I phone Tan and she drives back from York. Lots of singing. Lots of praise. "We've got the largest number of children of any MCC church in the nation," says one of the members. I look around at families of all kinds, including the standard husband, wife, and children. The common bond here is not the form of marriage but the love between partners.

"God loves you," is the core of Pastor Debbie Coggins message—like the Assembly of God elementary school teacher—but with a difference, a refusal to tie love and judgment together. The distinction makes all the difference. When I went to seminary, looking into my tradition for what I could use for my life, this difference was why I stayed. We called it grace.

Keeping love and judgment separate seems to be that one core quality, that one vital characteristic whose presence or absence breeds all the variations of spirituality, faith, religion, church.

Churches often talk a good line
about unconditional love. Christians,
and others too, can speak of grace
and inclusion. But in our depths,

acceptance comes hard.
Judging ourselves against others
offers the illusion of sanity,
the pattern of predictability.

We judge to exclude.
We judge to hang on.
"Compared to that poor bugger,
I've got nothing to complain about."

Our comparisons identify us. Our enemies identify us. During World War Two we interred our own Japanese-American citizens at Manzanar because of our fears. These days, terrorists serve as our national enemy. Guantanamo Bay holds hundreds of people without trial, the bad aftertaste of judgment in the wake of September 11, 2001. Queer people also get turned into enemies.

After worship we stay for coffee hour, visiting with the members. One woman tells of too many drugs for too many years, too much struggle at the edge of despair. She sums up her journey with simple words. "I am a Christian person. I am a sexual being. I have finally learned to celebrate both these parts of who I am."

As people head home, Pastor Debbie invites us to stay overnight. "Thanks," I reply, "but I'd better keep riding. I'm trying to make Gettysburg for the 4th of July tomorrow."

Chapter Seventeen

"Couldn't Care Less"

PREACHER, preacher, lunch. I take the morning's worship experiences into a Chinese restaurant a mile west of Vision of Hope. Sitting at a formica table next to a father and his daughter, the father asks about my unicycle. The twelve-year-old daughter keeps eating her lunch as I answer questions. After all the technical details of speed and miles and who carries my gear, Dad asks, "Are you riding for a cause?" The luster leaves his face as I give my first sentence about riding Straight Into Gay America.

"What do you think?" I ask.

"It's wrong. It's a sin," he answers. "I'm a Christian."

I ask about equal rights. I tell him about Greg and Willie and others I've met—hospital visitation, next of kin rights, inheritance.

"Honestly," he says, with conversation-stopping finality. "I couldn't care less."

"Couldn't care less?" The words ricochet through me, even as I finish my meal, even as I get back on One Wheel and start spinning my legs toward York and Gettysburg.

"Couldn't care less?" How can a Christian say this?

The point of Jesus
is for us to care more,
not to care less.
"Couldn't care less?"

These words irk more
than anything else on this entire trip.
Back on the road I can't decide
whether to wish a lesbian daughter

on this care-less man
or to wish she grows up
heterosexual so she won't be the one
to try to knife through Dad's apathy.

"Couldn't care less" finally uncaps me. I feel like I'm bubbling over, all the experiences since Manhattan needing release. On this hot afternoon, riding toward the most famous battle of our country's history, again not knowing where I'll stay tonight, I turn my unicycle into a solitary pulpit, pretending I'm the preacher, as I once was on every Sunday.

My stomach used to turn each time I stood up in the pulpit. The shyness of my youth has never fully left me, but a part of the anxiety came from knowing the job of preaching is to pull off the covers we wrap so tightly around ourselves, to penetrate our masks, to drill beneath the veneer that makes us judgmental and lets us get by with saying, "I'm a Christian," and "I couldn't care less."

I became a preacher because I believe in stories. Real life. Real faith. After hearing two preachers today, I can't help taking a shot at a One Wheel sermon—

Faith Starts When Shit Happens.

Don't think of Jesus, too much baggage.
Think of a regular guy or a girl. Don't think of God,
either, too much baggage. Think of your boss,
or your high school principal, or the honor society

of your college coming to you, declaring to you,
so all can hear, "You are the one we've been waiting for—
Magna Cum Laude, job promotion, retirement bonus,
A-plus on the high-school math final."

After the announcement you drive home, dreaming
about what's coming next, and you're like the rest
of us who believe the faucets of heaven
have opened perpetual blessings.

I pedal on, checking for story glaze
in my non-existent congregation. I know
they'd still be listening, but I risk losing them
if I start to talk about Jesus—crazy irony.

We don't really listen to Jesus talk; we mostly have Jesus
cornered, under control. We make Jesus say what we want,
"God wants you to be rich!" despite every warning
by Jesus to sell our goods, give to the poor. Try anyway.

Think about Jesus, just a regular guy who shows up
at a river, gets dunked for a baptism, and has the heavens
open up with a dove descending onto his shoulder.
A voice comes from heaven, "You are my beloved child,

with you I am well pleased." Think how often we read
this story or hear it preached, and just say "duh"
in our heads. Of course, this is Jesus. What else
would you expect for Jesus? We never expect

what comes next, how instead of easy street,
and the blessings we expect for the Son of God,
Jesus gets sent into the wilderness.
Immediately.

According to the gospel of Mark, this is not an RV excursion into a desert resort. This is the Son of God, beloved, doing everything right, and now, shit happens. This is not supposed to happen to Jesus, ending up

near death, fasting for forty days, tempted by the devil,
all the time in the world to think about his river outing.
How did the greatest blessing turn into the greatest curse?
What went wrong? What to do now?

Guilt? — "God, if I'd just gotten that dove
to land on my left shoulder instead of my right shoulder,
everything would still be fine." *I must have done*
something wrong to deserve this mess —

Run? — "God, you're an undependable deity,
one minute you bless me, the next you nearly kill
me." *Thanks for the offer, but I'll do better*
on my own, take care God, see ya later, maybe—

Insulate? —"okay God, if this is how it is with you,
I'll need a safety net, 401K, huge house, life insurance
for protection." *I'll still love you; I'll credit my success to you,*
but God, I'm going to make sure I don't go hungry again —

Jesus chose differently.

Wilderness is the end of the predictable God,
my favorite story in all of Scripture,
the beginning of faith, the little crack
in all the sanitized, controlled, predictable

brickwork that has tangled around Jesus over these last
two-thousand years. Crucifixion was supposed to break
through the whole "nice God" illusion, but if the murder of
God's own son, his abandonment by all the disciples,

his complete rejection by the religious and political
authorities, if all this isn't enough to crack the
predictability patina, then can anything do the job?
Can anything keep us from believing we have life

under control? Good things should follow God's blessings.
Bad things should follow if God curses. We want
a predictable God. We build our cosmos this way.
It's all wrong. The greatest faith icons

know that depending on consequences can't explain human existence—everyone from Dorothy Day to Desmond Tutu, from
Thomas Merton to Martin Luther, certainly
Sarah and Abraham, Noah, Ruth, Job, Mary, and Jesus.

Jesus chose a queer answer to his wilderness dilemma.
"Okay God, if you're this crazy, this undependable,
this unpredictable, this life-threatening, I'll quit
counting on outcomes. I'll try love and compassion."

After Jesus returns from the wilderness, the main things he does are to help people, heal people, teach people, and love people. Jesus survives just three years after the wilderness, and then he meets his crucifixion. Compassion is more important than length of life. After coming so close to death in the desert, the quality of his life now counts more than the quantity. And I believe, on the strength of his love, he had fun, even in the midst of the most serious issues of life and death. Jesus had a great time with outcasts. Mark tells one of those times in the fifth chapter.

Pigs. “Did you see?
Jesus just cast pigs over
that cliff! He killed them all.”
The disciples question whether they’ve chosen

the right guy to follow. Then an opportunity,
Jairus, a leader of a synagogue, arrives, casting class
and respectability all around. Jesus glows in its light as
Jairus asks Jesus to heal his daughter. The disciples relax a bit

“Now we’re getting somewhere.
This is good press, we can get traction
out of this scene. No more pigs for us!”
The possibilities look good, real good,

Jesus in a jostling crowd, center of this big parade,
heading to a healing, side by side with status,
a real media event. “We’re going somewhere now.”
You can just hear the boys.

“Who touched me?” Jesus asks, barely
heard in the crowd. “Whad’ya say boss?”
“Who touched me?” Jesus asks again.
Rolling eyes, “Whad’ya mean boss? Everyone

is touching you, everyone is here to see you. This road
is packed. Look at this,” Peter sweeps his hand,
encompassing possibilities. “Who touched me?”
Jesus insists. The first edge of panic returns

to the disciples, the memory of yesterday’s
pigs still too fresh. The crowd begins to quiet.
And she walks forward, the outcast on the edge,
the untouchable, the woman with the flow of blood

for the last twelve years. The disciples shoot a gaze
at the synagogue leader—this can't be good. She's kneeling
now. The whole parade has stopped. "I knew
if I could just touch the hem of your garment

I would be healed," she whispers. Outcasts
know love and judgment never go together.
Parade leaders hardly ever understand this difference,
media events hardly ever stop, bent toward

self, status, and possibilities.
That's the thing about Jesus. After baptism
and wilderness Jesus' stop light is set
for one thing: Compassion.

A servant of Jairus arrives,
"Don't bother coming. The girl is dead."
"Blew it again!" Thomas exasperates to John.
Opportunity missed, this makes the pig debacle

look small. "Don't worry," Jesus speaks. "She's not dead, just sleeping." More embarrassment. "What's he saying?
How much more can we take?" Matthew wonders.
But indeed, it is as Jesus says. She's sleeping,

and she rises up healthy at the arrival,
of the one who lets nothing block the
way of love: not uncleanness, not high status,
not schedules, not press, not the beggar

at the hem of his garment.
I love this queer story,
but I don't yet love it enough,
to be fully at peace on the outside edge.

I like acceptance. I like security. I still roll into a cocoon when the barrage of negativity gets too long. Fifteen miles from Gettysburg a couple on a tandem passes me, then slows to ask questions

about my unicycle. When I get my turn to ask my gay rights question, there's a quick, curt wish for a good ride before they pour muscle into their cranks to speed away from me.

Further down the road a grandpa is standing at the roadside, set to take my picture. He shouts an invitation to join the family reunion in the yard. Someone hollers an offer of a beer. I stop and we talk back and forth. They're fascinated by my unicycle. This time I don't mention why I'm riding.

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. On the battlefield.

I'm learning to understand
closets. A certain threshold of opposition
makes it feel easier to shut up than to speak out.
Who knows what I miss

by not sharing my ride with these people?
Maybe these are allies who would be thankful
to hear of my journey. Perhaps gay family
members live here, or maybe these people have friends

to tell me of. Tired from the religious litany of judgment
I've absorbed this afternoon, I share only light conversation,
thank them for the Budweiser, and return
to One Wheel for the last ten miles to Gettysburg.

It's 8:00 p.m. when I arrive, twelve hours since we left the Assembly of God Church this morning. Tan is talking to a lesbian couple when I find her. Their house too is packed to the rafters with relatives. The night darkens, and we're coming up short on housing.

We talk to more folks here in town, but for the first time in three weeks, we find nothing for lodging. I think of Jesus' words and how often he must have dealt with evenings like this. "Foxes have holes. Birds of the air have nests. But the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." If I'd accepted Pastor Debbie's invitation this morning, we'd be all ready for a comfortable night's sleep.

"Plastic?" Tan finally asks, when the sky is full black.

We find a tiny eight-room motel a mile east of town, and I hand over my VISA card, buying a bed for the first time on this trip, exhausted more from the spinning of my mind today than from the turning of my wheel.

"Hey," Tan says, "I've got a surprise for you." She pulls out jumbo sparklers. Enough of this preaching to myself. Enjoy the ride.

"Can we tape these onto your handlebars? I want to film you riding after I light them." Two weeks ago, back in Connecticut, Tan had me dress up in her cow costume she carries with her every time she travels. She gets a costumed picture taken in each new place, and thought it was a good idea for me, too. Now she pulls out duct tape, holding the sparklers in her hands, walking toward my unicycle.

"Sure," I laugh. 4th of July eve, and we create our own little circus in the parking lot.

"Good enough," Tan says after I ride twenty flaming loops in the parking lot.

As she packs up the camera, she grins. "Jen will get a good a surprise when she loads this onto the computer."

Straight into gay america

Part III

South

Chapter Eighteen

Death Road

GETTYSBURG.

Jen thought this battlefield would offer great Fourth of July footage for the documentary. I kept telling her I'd follow the sense of the road, stay in line with the direction of the hospitality, and see where we end up each day. The last anchor point was New York City. The next one is Lynchburg, with Soulforce, and with Jerry Falwell at Thomas Road Baptist Church. But here we are in Gettysburg, stories have led the way. The tale here is history. I pedal through endless cannons, picket fences, and monuments. Of the 172,000 soldiers who gathered to fight at Gettysburg on the three first days of July in 1863, 51,000 became casualties.

"It's a sin," the Harley man tells me a little later. He's not talking about the death and destruction of the Civil War; that's a na-

tional icon. No, he's on a motorcycle tour with his wife and another couple, and he's telling me about queer life. "The Bible says homosexuality is wrong."

"I'm a preacher," I tell them. I give them alternatives for interpreting bible passages. They give me strange looks. My role as pastor and my ride on One Wheel seems to jar their sense of order. I tell them about Willie and Greg in Vermont, about the rights they now have.

Despite their incredulity, one of the wives offers, "Everyone should have those rights."

I tell them about the 1,138 federal rights Don and Willie still don't have.

The talkative husband balks. "I'd want to see what all those rights are before I'd want to grant them."

"Sure you would," I think to myself as our conversation ends and I watch them put on helmets to power away on their Harleys. "You want to study those rights so you can control what queer people get and what they don't. A minute ago you didn't even know about the 1,138 laws. Now you want the power to distribute the rights."

Maybe I'm wrong about this man's motivations, but I see over and over again how difficult it is for people with power to trust those on the margins and to make room at the center of the circle. Maybe this man on his motorcycle will go home and study the 1,138 laws. Or maybe he won't. Unlike Don and Willie who live with the consequences of inequality every day, this man can choose to get involved or keep his distance from this equal rights journey.

I must still feel the frustration of yesterday's meeting with the man at the Chinese Restaurant. I'm aware this motorcycle rider also has the choice to say, "I couldn't care less." From this tour I have a growing list of people who will be hurt if he makes that choice.

The riders put their bikes in gear and drive south from town toward the Gettysburg battlefield, the equal rights war no one could avoid. Slavery and the fate of the Southern plantation was one reason for the bloodshed; the 1850s census showed half of all Southern wealth was going to just two of every thousand families.

Economic expansion for the North was another problem; worker strikes and rebellions had been growing in Northern factories since the 1830s. Of the thirty million people living in the North and the South in 1861, 623,000 died and another 471,000 were wounded during the Civil War. In this land dedicated to the proposition all men are created equal, over a million people, one of every thirty Americans, fell in combat.

If equal rights are not present, the margins often end up threatening the existing balance of power. Resolving the issue of slavery threw the entire nation into turmoil. I feel this lesson as I stand here in Gettysburg. Recovering a balance point between the margin and the center was Abraham Lincoln's dilemma all during the war. In August 1862 he replied to a *New York Times* article. "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that."

I memorized Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in elementary school, but it's this line about slavery I struggle with the most. Lincoln said he'd do whatever it took to save the Union, no matter the outcome for the people in slavery's bondage. Was that the best solution? Did that choice set the stage for the civil rights struggles that continue even today? Or did his focus on saving the Union keep our land from total disintegration? I don't know the answers. I can't even imagine how difficult it must have been to face the decisions made during the Civil War.

All I know is I don't want to keep Lincoln's balance point. Today I hear arguments that sound like Lincoln's reply to the *Times,* that the quest for queer rights is upsetting our nation's stability. Maybe Lincoln's approach was right for his day. Maybe the commentators who argue for the status quo today are even right, but I know this is not my goal or my belief. I know I seek a new equilibrium; the needs of the margins placed at the center of our concerns. I believe this is the best way to achieve the goal of the Declaration of Independence I celebrate on this 4th of July day; "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania Memorial.

In the queer community the death count is less than it was in the Civil War, but it exists: high rates of suicide; the persistent recurrence of hate crimes; the chopping short of dreams, creativity, and productivity. No monument like Gettysburg exists to mark the numbers of these fallen. Most people can still just put on their helmets and ride away. On the issue of queer rights, most people

don't have to face Lincoln's tension between preserving status quo and implementing justice. Here at the battlefield, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address words speak to me and my ride, "that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

Slavery. Religion. Women. Immigrants. Children. Queer people. The birthing of new freedom is a constant process. On this Independence Day, back on One Wheel and pedaling through the battlefield, I make it to Frederik, Maryland. My tour is more than half-done, and I decide to find a hotel with a hot tub so I can spend the rest of this day as a holiday. After I check in, Tan goes exploring in town. I spend hours, back and forth between the hot tub, the pool, and the computer—writing, writing, writing, looking for patterns in the tide of experience that keeps washing over me.

Tuesday, 5 July. This morning I ride closest to my death. The passage from Maryland into Virginia greets me with no shoulder and the full rush of the morning commute. When Tan catches up to me at the EZ-Gas Mart, she wants pictures. I'm still too shaken to agree, but she is in videographer mode and not to be denied. We walk back a few hundred yards where she tries various angles, filming trucks as they roar by the four-inch shoulder. After awhile I calm down enough to agree for a camera shot. Traffic has diminished on the far side of the road, and there's a half-mile straightaway from that direction—enough sight distance for me to judge traffic before I ride. With the camera set up, I time a couple of passes to have trucks pass me by, careful to abandon the attempt when I see opposing traffic. I do three of these passes and then beg off. This morning was too close.

Virginia Roads.

Only one other time was I run off the road. It too happened in Virginia, while I rode north into the Appalachians, headed for Kentucky so I could add it to my tally of fifty states. Leaving Claypool Hills in morning fog, I ascended into the mountains on highway 460, with the two-foot-wide shoulder disappearing and the fog increasing. Just out of town the speed limit increased to sixty, and I found myself pedaling a corner with trucks on one side of me, a rock face on the other, and no shoulder between the two. More than 5,000 miles into my journey, I was stopped for the first and only time.

As Tan drives me into Leesburg, I remember these difficulties with Virginia. This time feels different. I have listened to so many stories of rights, prejudices, and social patterns on this trip I can't help seeing how the system is involved in my predicament. Either someone, somewhere in the Virginia Department of Transporta-

tion has consciously decided to make no room for bicyclists on their state roads, or else officials simply neglect the minority concerns of pedestrians and cyclists. Whatever the reason, these margins are deadly to One Wheel.

Three years ago, unicycling through all fifty states, I found a way to pedal every inch of my 9,136 miles. Today's danger suddenly makes me feel far from my family. I feel scared of putting myself in harm's way, of risking injury or death for this ride, of risking the family reunion I long for more each day.

I feel more angry today than three years ago, forced to quit for my own safety on a road I have every right to ride, forced to choose my family rather than risk this ride, all because there's no provision for my passage. But I have a way out. When I need to escape the road for the sake of my safety, I join the crowd, hop in a car, and become like everyone else. I feel more angry today because I know for queer people feeling threatened by an unsafe margin, escape often means hiding in a closet.

I look over at my driver. Tan's a lifesaver this morning. She's becoming a good friend. On her own road of life, despite starring in her documentary, *Not Straightforward*, Tan still hasn't told her mom she is lesbian. Her unsafe coming-out journey is much more difficult than my morning on Virginia roads.

Back in Massachusetts, Tan had stayed up almost all night, talking with a PFLAG mom about parent-child relationships, about what it was like for Eileen to have her son come out to her, what's been helpful in the process. I'd gone to bed that night, weary from the road. For these two women, this conversation was life and death. I understand this better now. I understand why Eileen and many others keep their little struggling PFLAG chapters open, and why others start advocacy and assistance organizations throughout the country. They keep the turnouts and the rest areas open along our unsafe highways.

Even as I pedal Straight Into Gay America and discover these stories, Dad keeps e-mailing that I'm growing too concerned with special rights. "Don't forget people in the mainstream make this country function."

Dad and I seem to be diverging more and more. Safety, whether on roads or in society, feels like such a basic right to me.

The more experiences I report on, the more arguments he finds against what I am discovering. I can't understand why inclusion of outsiders threatens the mainstream. Shouldn't we all feel safer knowing acceptance is a basic right, instead of being subject to religious or cultural standards?

I'm worried about where my relationship with Dad is headed. All these stories seem to be driving the wedge in deeper between us. The more stories I encounter, the more theory he gives me. If I weren't pushing so hard into these experiences, maybe I could leave our conversations on the abstract level. That's no longer possible.

Welcome to Virginia

In a personal way I'm feeling the words of Jesus saying, "I came to set a man at odds against his father…one's foes will be those of his own household." I feel the hard irony of how pushing compassion for outsiders can make family function so challenging. I need more miles to let this ride keep working on me. What

does it mean to honor this Straight Into Gay America experience? How do I keep the commandment to honor my father and my mother? This is my taste of the coming out struggle so many queer people face.

Sitting in the passenger seat of Tan's car, I brood on these thoughts until we reach Leesburg. Once we get off Highway 15 Tan stops in front of a convenience store. I pull One Wheel out from the backseat to resume riding.

Despite the dangers, Virginia turns out valuable. Along with the unsafe roads and all the emotions raised by my fear, I've also been warned, "The farther south you travel, the less acceptance you'll find for gays." In truth I do hear more and more comments about "the sin of homosexuality." Yet I keep running into people who are supportive. At the Leesburg Visitor Center, the attendant is an immigrant from Germany.

"My husband and I simply don't understand attitudes in America. In Europe, we even have gay marriage in the Netherlands. It works. It's fine."

She agrees to an interview on camera, and Tan records another tape. The woman makes sure to say she is speaking for herself and not on behalf of the visitor center. Despite her disclaimers, I get a call on my cell phone.

"My boss was very upset I spoke to you. You can't use that tape from the visitor center. If you want an interview, you'll have to come back and retape it somewhere else."

Later in the day I stop in the countryside to speak with a roadside walker.

"Be careful," she warns. "This road is full of gravel trucks. What are you riding for, anyway?"

Her attitude resembles the German woman's: "I don't have any trouble with equal rights for gay people. Whatever they call it, I think they should have it. But you'd find a lot of people around here who don't agree. I wasn't born in this area, so I see differently on a lot of topics."

Turns out her cousin is lesbian. "She was my best little buddy when we were growing up. Everyone knows she's lesbian, but we don't talk about it in the family. My husband, he really disagrees. He's a bigot. And I tell him that. I tell him he's a bigot.

"But it's how he was raised. His mother would never have a black person in her house. At least my husband is OK with that now."

The roads to Culpepper turn long, hot, and steamy, and they remain narrow. Gravel trucks keep rolling by. When a set comes three in a row, I notice the second one is personalized with a big logo on it, "This cat walks the dog." The third truck is lettered, "In memory of my brother Danny Compton." These trucks on Virginia roads feel so threatening, but the stickers help me realize these drivers have regular lives and regular cares. Suddenly I'm looking not at forty tons of steel and rock rolling inches from my unicycle: I'm staring at story, wondering who's behind that wheel? Who is the brother of Danny Compton?

The day becomes hotter and hotter, but because a friend of mine is driving over from West Virginia to meet me in Culpepper, I keep pedaling. After the delay of this morning's road danger, I'm pedaling fast to regain time. A thundershower packs the day with even more humidity. Today is Tan's last day with me, so she's filming shots along the road. Horse ranches are the main sight in these Appalachian foothills. I pass by mile after mile of fences, most of them painted black; only a few are white. Exquisite mansions are mostly hidden beyond the view from the road, but I still see prosperity.

By afternoon I once again feel in danger of overheating. I stop every few miles to try to normalize my body temperature. Small roads have provided some traffic relief. Every car has to slow for me before passing carefully, but with few cars on these country roads, I feel safer. Tan has driven ahead to Culpepper.

During the final fifteen miles, the road again packs up with traffic. A woman at a gas station fills a giant cup with ice for me. It melts faster than I can drink it, turning tepid. Even stopping every couple miles, I feel myself losing energy. Paying attention to so many cars and trucks again saps me further, and I begin to feel afraid once more.

Worn out and unwilling to risk this road, I call Tan on her cell phone. With a mixture of fear and resignation, I ask again for a ride to safety.

"I'll head back right now," Tan tells me. "Take a break."

Tan will leave this evening and head back for Seattle. Tomorrow I'll be here in Virginia, figuring out how to survive these roads all alone.

Before Tan finds me, my friend Dave Twedt sees my unicycle and pulls off the road to give me a sweaty welcome hug. The big grin and the blue and white Hawaiian shirt look as familiar as ever on his six-foot frame. This is the guy who gave himself a Harley for graduating from seminary.

Four years ago Dave rode a one-man bicycle tour of all the Lutheran churches in West Virginia. He was gathering support to provide bicycles for children in Central American communities. Three years ago, joining me for a day on my fifty-state ride, we pedaled together through Tennessee. We talked about his plans to someday bicycle cross-country to help raise hunger assistance funding. Now he's just driven two-and-a-half hours so we can spend an evening together.

After all the different church experiences of this trip, I appreciate Dave as a sounding board. I catch him up on the seminary, Assembly of God, and the Metropolitan Community Church. I tell him about the person who "couldn't care less."

"It's just going to take time," Dave says. "But I see the day when the ELCA will be fully inclusive. It's coming."

In the past year Dave moved from a parish in northern West Virginia to one a few hours south. "Where I am now has more influence from Washington, DC. Real estate is going crazy. It's bringing more openness to this community than I experienced in my last parish. As time goes on, people are understanding equal rights is the right thing."

Dave is the voice of reason, always finding the positive. I love this about my friend, but tonight I'm frazzled and beat from a full day's encounter with these roads. Talking about long-term change feels far removed from my battle with unsafe shoulders. I believe it takes all kinds of people to make the world a different, better place, but I know why activists get angry. Tonight I'm still too close to a racing heart and near misses with trucks. Tonight I'd be called one of "those people," the ones with a radical gay agenda. Nearness to death changes my focal length.

In the morning I pedal south from Culpepper. Dave returns to West Virginia. Tan has already driven back to the Baltimore airport for her flight home to Seattle. I ride all alone again.

I can't get any energy going. Charlottesville is just 45 miles south, but I feel tired from the very first pedal stroke. The overheating from yesterday takes its toll. The stress must have its part, too. Weary like this, I count miles, something I hate to do. My odometer records each revolution, but with mind and body so tired, the miles accumulate with aggravating slowness. The remains of tropical storm Cindy are on their way too, making the weather even more oppressive. I slog through until lunchtime, taking a nap along the way.

In Barbourville, I buy food at a convenience store, the only visible commerce anywhere. The attendant flips burgers on a grill as small as a pizza box, eight quarter-pound patties at a time. Ordering a double, I take it outside to eat under a covered picnic table. Then another nap, using the table for a bed. Each time I wake up I look at my watch, then fall back asleep, too tired to get started. An hour later I shake myself awake and walk back into the convenience store for another lemonade.

"Oh, thank God, you're alive," exclaims the attendant. "I thought my hamburger killed you!"

She follows outside, asking how I can ride in this weather. I tell her I'm not sure I can.

When she asks if I'm doing this crazy thing for any special reason, I hesitate to tell her. This place fits every one of the stereotypes about queer-hating places. It's rural; there's barely a town here. It's Southern; people have been warning me since before I started this trip. It's redneck; construction pickups are filled with tobacco chewing white men. But she has asked, so I tell her I'm riding Straight Into Gay America. I ask what she thinks about gay rights.

"They need some," she says without hesitation.

"Not exactly the answer I'd expect from around here," I say, even though I've been hearing her same answer more often than expected.

"Plenty of people here would disagree with me, but I play on a softball team. The coach and his wife and I are the only people on the team who aren't lesbians.

"We've traveled all over to play softball, even to South Carolina. I love my teammates. They're just regular people."

Softball Woman watches me ride off with my lemonade in hand. I look back at her and wave. This encounter is a repeat of my breakfast in Orange, another tiny town, twenty miles back. The couple at the table next to mine were fascinated by the unicycle. When we got around to talking queer rights, the woman responded first.

"Of course I'm for equal rights. I've lived here for twenty-five years, but I'm a Vermonter. I moved for my husband. After all these years I still don't understand the mindset around here. My husband, though, he's come around."

When I walked back out to One Wheel, he accompanied me for pictures. The steep street in front of the restaurant made a hard task of mounting and maneuvering, but I managed a couple passes in front of his camera before waving goodbye.

During the afternoon I keep a slow pace. I was too close to heat exhaustion yesterday, and now I make sure not to push myself. Poking into Charlottesville I stop at a McDonald's for air conditioning and a cold shake. It's 4:00 p.m.

Once again I have no idea where I'm staying tonight. My string of every night hospitality ended back in Gettysburg, the night I took the motel room. That little feat of riding from story-home to story-home didn't quite make it. And my thought of riding 1,000 miles point-to-point ended way back in Vermont, when Tan and Jen drove me to Massachusetts for interviews in North Hampton. My mileage has reached 809, so there's a decent shot at riding the full 1,000 miles. Still, I've talked and wandered so much on this ride that making the full mileage no longer feels sure.

Tired and sweaty, the pre-ride goals seep slowly out of me. Day by day I grow physically stronger, but Virginia roads weaken my spirit. I could take a motel room tonight. "So what," I tell myself. "you already have more stories than you'll ever be able to tell."

Chapter Nineteen

"I Didn't Want to Lose My Child"

With directions to the Charlottesville library, I head toward downtown. At the very center is the county courthouse. Laid out in 1762, the historical sign reports that Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe used to gather here together. Two blocks later I stand in front of the library. Just as I'm trying to decide where to park the unicycle, my phone rings. "Need a place to stay tonight?"

Mel White of Soulforce has been on the phone with me these last few days, encouraging me toward Lynchburg. A queer advocate for decades, Mel gained fame for writing his book *Stranger at the Gate* and then founding Soulforce to try to stop

spiritual violence against queer people. After coming out and writing *Stranger at the Gate*, he and partner Gary Nixon moved to a small house across the street from Jerry Falwell's church, attending each Sunday and standing in silent protest during the worship whenever defamatory remarks were made against queer people.

My own spirit needs the recharge of meeting Mel and Gary. Their story feels like a planet with its own gravity, drawing me in from a far distance. Tonight though, Mel has called Sara to tell her about my ride, and she's the one asking if I need a place to stay.

Sara is transexual. "Mel said you might be interested in talking."

I write for an hour at the library and then Sara picks me up on the way home from work. Sara's wearing a short orange print-pattern skirt. She's as tall as I am, athletic and feminine at the same time. Meeting Sara, I realize I'm still eager for stories.

"Should I bring the car over for your unicycle?"

"Walking's fine," I answer. For a block I'm self-conscious of my internal thoughts, "I'm on the sidewalk with a transgender person." Before we reach the first corner Sara becomes just another human being with a story.

"I'm a biker," Sara tells me, "mostly mountain biking. But I've never seen anything like your wheel here." She's fascinated by my unicycle, not as an oddity, but as a relative to her love of biking.

"Charlottesville here is pretty good for biking," Sara informs me after I tell her how hard it is to unicycle Virginia roads. "We've got a lot of bike lanes and bike trails in town. Out of town, though, those roads are tough."

Packing my unicycle into the back of Sara's blue Explorer, we push life vests out of the way. "Just got back from a canoe trip this weekend with friends," she tells me.

"Great rivers around here…

"Is Hamburger Helper okay for dinner? I've got plenty for both of us."

"Sounds great." The drive to Sara's home takes a dozen minutes. Arriving at her condo, we're back in the countryside, her duplex unit surrounded by a forest of trees. On the way here I've

learned Sara is just four months from retiring from her water works job. She's gotten her years in early. "I went to school for this, and I've done maintenance my whole career, playing with the big wrenches all day long."

Charlottesville, Virginia. Sara

She tells me the best death and resurrection story I've heard since Danielle and I were talking back in Vermont. "Ever since my transition, I still work underground with the guys. All day long I'm turning wrenches and fixing pipe, dressed just like I always have. After we finish I come back to the locker room and put on my wig and my dress and I head home as Sara."

"How did your coworkers take your gender change?"

"It's been five years now, and people have treated me well. My boss was excellent. When I told him about becoming Sara, he asked me what I needed from him. I had my list.

"Open communication was my top priority. And I wanted to be treated the same as when I was Steve. I was really, really nervous. But almost everyone has been supportive of me. There are a few who aren't. I can tell, but that's their problem. Mostly, all my relationships are better. Conversations have opened up that never would have happened."

"What's life like now?" I ask. We're in the condo now, an airy place, lots of windows facing into the woods.

"My life has color now; it has light."

Sara keeps talking about light. "I can finally live my life."

I feel like a journalist, gathering information I need for my story. Her life, that's the thing, the important truth. Biking, canoeing, working, reading, decorating her home, keeping her wardrobe. These are life, but she patiently answers the specific transgender questions I ask.

Sara hands me a beer and takes a sip of her own. "Used to have a bit of a problem with these," she holds up the bottle to look at it. We're standing in the kitchen now. Sara stirs the Hamburger Helper, sets it to simmer, and places a lid on the pan. "I tried to kill myself with this stuff and a Volkswagen bug," she says, "back when I was twenty-five. Racing down a dirt road in the forest, full of alcohol, I don't even remember how it happened. I woke up alive, car smashed, front end in a tree, beer bottles around my feet in the car. After that I figured God didn't want me dead.

"Soon after the Volkswagen crash, I was in a store, thumbing through a sex magazine. I found an article about a transgender person. My ears were burning in that store, holding that magazine, but I kept reading. It was the first time I'd ever heard about anyone else like myself. After that I headed to the library and started learning everything I could."

Sara has known she was female since she was a kid. Yet she never told a single person. "We transgenders are the best liars in the world," she laughs. "The best. God, I love not having to hide my underwear or my jewelry when guests come over to visit, or

being careful not to reveal I know too much about women's fashions and brassieres. That just wears you out."

"So after you found out there are other transgender people in the world you still waited twenty years to carry through with your gender change?"

Sara moves to take off the lid on the Helper. "Yep, I got married. I loved my wife. I thought I could make it through on just fantasies."

The lid is not coming off the Helper. She gives it a few more tugs; then she starts pulling on the lid top with full force, and this starts her laughing.

"This is really stuck. I've never had this happen."

I can't believe it, so I take a turn at the lid. Water works mechanic and mechanical engineer. I try finessing the lid, turning it round and round, trying to find some spot where it will come free and let us stir our dinner. Nothing works. Sara is laughing full force now.

"I'll get it," she says, and leaves the room, coming back with a pair of channel-lock pliers.

"Best of both worlds," she grins. "I've got my jewelry now, but I've still got all my tools. I thought I'd sell them when I became Sara, but after I discovered the cost of mechanics, I decided to keep my gear."

By the time the lid finally breaks loose it resembles a taco shell, bent and crumpled, eliciting a final "Gotcha!" as it gives way to Sara. She'd be a riot to turn wrenches with at the water works.

When we finally sit down to eat, I ask more questions. "So five years ago, you decided to start your change?"

"I took a long time, didn't I? Too much alcohol, too much depression and too many antidepressants. Too much lying. My marriage ended, and that was nasty. When my marriage finished, I finally decided I had nothing left to lose, nothing in the way of starting my transition.

"I wouldn't recommend it," Sara says. "If a person can get by with cross-dressing, I'd say stick with that. Psychological evaluations. Finding a doctor. All the pain. Finding the courage to tell people. It's new life for me, but it wouldn't have been

worth all the trouble unless I really, really knew it was the only way for me to live." She laughs again now to ease the revelation of this journey.

Transition took a full year, beginning with dividing her world into places she would continue dressing as Steve, and places she would begin publicly dressing as Sara. She arranged for surgeries in Wisconsin, preceded by psychological evaluations to certify she wasn't acting on a whim. "Who would do this without thinking it through?" Sara asks. "All those surgeries. Removing facial hair was the most painful."

I listen without probing to what Sara offers about her procedures. My friend Dotti Berry advised me never to ask if a transgender person has had surgery yet. "The surgery just puts form on a person's identity. And some people who have transgender identity can't afford the expensive surgeries," she told me. "Technically, transgender describes an identity. Transsexual means someone has gone through gender reassignment surgery." Dotti calls it GAS—Gender Affirmation Surgery. "If you want to know about the medical procedures, you can find information in plenty of places without interrogating a transsexual person."

Sara's mom lives in a condo just a few doors away. "Here she comes," says Sara, looking out the window. "The evening walk with Pip."

Pip wags her tail, waiting for a greeting from Sara, and then Sara introduces me to Joan, her mom. Dressed in perfect Southern attire, a white brimmed hat on her head, Joan walks onto the porch and we all take seats on the deck to visit. I soon discover Joan feels comfortable talking.

"Oh, I never had any idea Sara wanted to be a girl all her life."

"What does it feel like to gain a daughter?"

"It's good. It took some getting used to, after all, I'm eighty years old." Our chairs are arranged almost interview style, Sara and Joan seated next to each other as I face them.

"It took a lot of getting used to," Sara steps back into that time. "Telling Mom was the hardest thing I ever did. I remember not knowing whether she would reject me or accept me."

On that first evening of learning the news, Joan neither accepted nor rejected. "Go home," she said, "I need to figure out what's happening." She visited the psychologist who had helped her deal with the grief of her husband's death. She visited the library and began reading everything she could find. She attended a Soulforce gathering of queer people. "That really helped," she said, "hearing other people's stories."

"I knew one thing," she said, looking over at Sara. "I didn't want to lose my child."

Sara tells about the first time her mom was ready to see her dressed as Sara. It happened during the year of transition, before any of the surgeries. When Joan came to the point of saying she was ready, they decided to meet together for church. Sara was attending the MCC congregation in town. When Joan arrived at the church and parked and stepped out of the car, Sara was waiting to greet her. "Oh, come on," said Joan, taking her arm. "I'd recognize your big feet anywhere."

"If I had one thing to say?" Joan seems reluctant to make this statement. I'm asking what she would want to tell other moms of transgender people. Then she speaks with the passion of her eighty years. "I'd say to every parent, 'Don't lose your relationship with your child. That's the most important thing. Do everything you need to do to learn and understand your child.' I knew whatever happened, I did not want to lose my child."

"Sure," she continues, "I still have trouble with pronouns sometimes. I still get the he's and she's mixed up. But our relationship is better now than it's ever been."

Joan's on a roll now, looking straight into my face. "To think of those surgeries. They were really painful for Sara. I watched her go through all that. I have such respect for her."

The little dog-walk around the condos has turned into good conversation, but Joan ends it as the sunlight fades further from the sky. "Pip still needs to finish her walk." Together they head off. For talks like these, I'll keep braving Virginia roads.

Inside again, I drink down yet another glass of water. Sara tells me how anxious she felt when she first told her Mom. "I tried so many times to get up the courage, and then I'd back down. Fi-

nally one night I followed through. I really didn't know what she would do.

"People now are transitioning earlier and earlier in life. I wish I had, but I guess maybe I needed all those years to get ready. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to let people live out their gender identity, starting as children, dressing as they choose. I knew already by the time I was a little kid I preferred dolls and dresses and girl things. I wanted to be a girl."

Halfway, Virginia

Our evening ends early. Sara starts on the 6:00 a.m. shift at the water works. We finish the evening with talk of canoeing and kayaking. "Wish you could come with us this weekend. I'm going to kayak the James River with seven other friends. We have a great time."

Sounds great, but my weekend is destined for a different kind of trip. I'm just one day away from Lynchburg, from the Soulforce advocacy headquarters and from one of fundamentalism's poster

preachers, Jerry Falwell. Even shooting rapids in a kayak couldn't tempt me away from these next few days.

Most mornings I get up and sneak out the door alone, quietly letting my host sleep. Today, Sara's timing matches my own. She surprises me by coming out of her bedroom in biking gear. "I'm going to join you for your first few miles. I can guide you out of town. I need to see how you ride that unicycle."

Sara's is one more place I could spend much more time, one more person I'd like to know better. With a hug of thanks, I head south out of Charlottesville. My strategy for the road today is to follow Route 29, the four lane divided highway that goes directly to Lynchburg. I've been told I'll have a good shoulder to ride on.

Indeed, I leave Charlottesville on an eight-foot-wide shoulder, and when it lasts for more than a mile, I begin savoring this little piece of tar, this little bit of my own piece of creation. I consciously sense the freeing of my mind, allowing me to focus on more than just avoiding becoming road kill. Sara's visit has refreshed me.

And today I'll finally meet Mel White and Gary Nixon. Mel has been so welcoming by phone. I'm amazed he finds time to be so gracious. Author, pastor, father, non-violent activist and advocate, Mel is known nationally for his work to "Stop Spiritual Violence." I want to meet Mel because he's made the transition from institutional insider to making an effective contribution from outside of the established church.

Mel used to ghostwrite for famous evangelical preachers, including Pat Robertson, Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, and others. How much closer to the inside can a person get? When Mel came out publicly, his announcement made national news. Those who once gave him highest praise soon shunned him. In 1994, Mel published, "*Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*." He's an acknowledged expert on religion in America today and the damage it so often causes to queer people. He and Gary will have expert information for me, I'm sure, but what I'll really be looking for are clues to how I can find a future on the edge.

Mel has already offered to drive out from Lynchburg and give me a ride into town. The remains of tropical storm Christina are headed our way. "Call us anytime, anywhere," he offers a second

time. I plan to ride. If it rains, it will be warm. I won't mind. As long as I can ride a few feet away from the spray of trucks, I'll be OK.

I get thirty minutes of riding with the joy of a sufficient shoulder. Then at mile six, my eight-foot shoulder drops to two feet. Two miles further on, the white shoulder stripe is running right down the edge of the tar, stealing away every inch of my safe passage.

Perhaps if I had the spiritual maturity of Mel, or the non-violent fortitude of Gandhi and King, Mel's spiritual guides, perhaps then I wouldn't shout so quickly, so loudly, so fervently at this road. I don't even get a chance to think about this. Instead I snap my eye's focus back to my helmet mirror and immediately return to judging whether cars and trucks have room to pass. Once again, I return to survival mode. If it rains now, I won't chance riding this road.

With a good shoulder, I can sometimes ride the whole day and barely notice the pedals turning on my unicycle. Now, instead, my legs and body feel tense. They have accumulated the dangers of these last two days. The eighteen-wheelers do nothing wrong in their passage. Still, my eyes glare at them. Then the rain begins.

Three miles farther on I stop and buy cold grapefruit juice at a roadside gas station. "Town's just over the hill," the attendant responds. I've seen nothing but forest and country homes for the last many miles, so I get back on One Wheel, hoping to find a restaurant in Lovingston for a late breakfast. The only café I find won't open until 11 a.m.

With choices down to McDonalds or a grocery store, I choose donuts and fresh fruit. Sitting outside by the shopping cart rack, chewing each bite slowly, I study the clouds and watch the raindrops. They keep falling.

I don't like accepting rides when I'm on a tour, but after waiting as long as my patience allows, I walk across the parking lot and start asking drivers waiting in the McDonald's drive-up line. I don't ask the shiny cars, dripping as I am. On the fifth ask, the driver of a mufflerless S-10 pickup agrees I can throw my unicycle

in the back. I squeeze One Wheel in between boxes of satellite TV dishes.

The truck reflects my mood. The tires don't match. Neither does the paint on the right front panel. The driver looks all of a redneck. He's young, just a few years out of high school. On the highway, with mismatched tires singing from the rain, I hear about satellite dish installation, how John sets up three each day, six days a week. John asks about my ride. I tell him what I'm doing and ask his thoughts.

He bites down the last of his Egg McMuffin. "People should be able to do what they want. I'm not saying if I approve or disapprove, that doesn't matter."

"What about other folks around here, would they be as accepting?"

"No way."

"So many people say this," I tell John. "People say that they're accepting, but their neighbors aren't. Are they just feeding me a line because I'm on a unicycle?"

"Yep," he answers. "There's a lot of mean motherfuckers around here."

John's language confirms my experience. Hospitality does work best when we become vulnerable. I still feel amazed by the conversations I've had with Sidewalk Girl, Burgundy Face, and even yesterday with Softball Woman. Without putting ourselves at risk with another person, how will we discover our common ground? One Wheel keeps opening up the better sides of the people I'm meeting.

Ten minutes south the rain lets up. The grey sky remains, but after a couple more miles, the road turns dry. I decide to ride again. Fifteen miles left to Lynchburg. As I watch John drive off, I recall my elder friend Loren wishing me a "You, too?" ride.

Loren tells a story he calls "You, too?" In East Germany, in that time just before the wall came down, people overcame a generation of fear and at long last began coming out on the streets to protest for change. One night, in the teeming throng, a woman from an apartment was shocked to see her neighbor standing next to her. After all the years of silence and oppression, she could only cry out, "You, too?"

"That," said Loren, the retired Lutheran professor with a gay son, "is what I wish for you to discover."

I think his wish is coming true. My own hopes for a dry road last almost to Lynchburg. By the time it starts to rain again I'm near an Ekhard's drug store that offers refuge from the weather and a chance to telephone Mel. For the second time this morning I end up sitting on concrete, watching rain. I get three postcards written before Gary and Mel arrive to greet me.

"How do you survive these roads?" Mel asks incredulously. Yesterday he and Gary had said I'd find space on the road. Now, even on their short drive out to me, they see shoulders in a new way, and recognize their absence.

"Virginia's my toughest state," I tell them. "The worst riding of all fifty."

"Well, let's load up your unicycle. We'll take care of you while you're with us in Lynchburg. First, we'll get you some lunch." We're off, driving in a car like almost every other Virginian. Today is Thursday. Jen will return to the ride tomorrow, and Tan will arrive on Saturday. For the next four nights I know where I'll be staying. After these weeks of touring day by day, these weeks of taking whatever the road offers up, four days in one home feels like a long-term lease.

Chapter Twenty

Soulforce

"WELCOME LARS!"

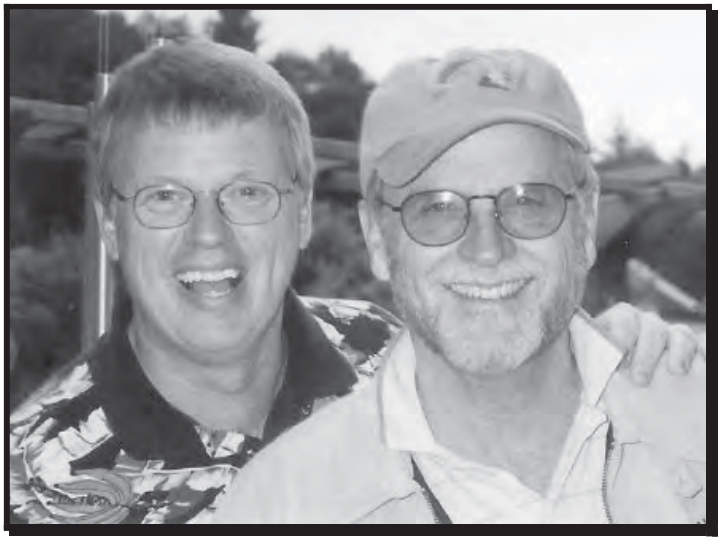
The vinyl banner is staked out in foot-high letters as we approach the corner of Mel and Gary's driveway. A few hours earlier I'd been stopped alongside the road for an interview with the evening news. This too, thanks to Mel. On the short drive here, Mel has already quizzed me on what contacts I've made for my stay in Washington, DC.

"And also," he tells me, "you can expect the newspaper to show up this afternoon or tomorrow." My wandering journey has landed in the palm of professionals.

Bronzed statues of deer stand in the garden, greeting our entry to Mel and Gary's home.

"This house is a California design," explains Mel. "The owner spent a dozen years building it and then got divorced. After that the house stood empty until we bought it. Everyone around here wants Virginia brick."

The five-bedroom house provides perfect headquarters for Soulforce. Gary seems wired for hospitality. Following Mel inside, the house greets me with the mood of an exquisite bed and breakfast. "Gary knows the estate liquidator in town," Mel laughs. "Almost everything in our house, Gary found there."



Lynchburg, Virginia. Gary and Mel.

Gary's the quieter one, leaving public commentary to Mel. "People call me Martha Stewart," Gary smiles, showing me to my room: a queen-sized bed for four nights. I see chocolate mints on

the pillows. "Use the desk for your writing. We have wireless Internet." The basement living room also has a big-screen TV, and off to the side, a separate game room with a pool table.

Another room stacked with books draws me in. "This is our inventory," Gary explains. Books, publications, videos, and DVDs line the walls, just some of the tools they use for their work of stopping spiritual violence. For years Soulforce has also followed the news, recording the words and actions of religious fundamentalist leaders, tracking their hatred of homosexuality. I see shelves filled with archives.

"Jen will love this. She's looking for historical footage."

We move back upstairs. No matter how big or small a house I visit, the kitchen is always the most popular space. As I drink down a tall glass of iced-tea, Mel starts quizzing me on my journey. Gary joins us after taking a phone call.

"Lars is telling me everyone he meets says gay people should have equal rights." Mel keeps returning to this statement. I keep adding stories of encounters I've had along the road.

"Your experience is the same as ours here in Lynchburg," he tells me. "Most people outside of town think everyone here believes like Jerry Falwell does. But most people in Lynchburg are just great with us living here. Our neighbors are wonderful. We know all sorts of supportive people in this city.

"Still," continues Mel, "we've got a long road ahead of us. People can talk about equality all they want, but there's still the 'ick factor.' For too many people there's still a gut reaction that two men loving each other is gross. Many people just can't separate equal rights from bedroom sex."

Gary and Mel's particular concerns focus on fundamentalism's attack on homosexuals: the diatribe, the fear, the politics, the ex-gay movement, and all the facets employed by the religious right to sharpen anti-gay attitudes in this country. Countless preachers have declared homosexuality will destroy our nation. Tornadoes, hurricanes, and even the destruction of the World Trade Center have been cited as retribution for homosexual sins in our country.

Mel has collected data through the years to support his assertion that religious fundamentalists started attacking homosexual-

ity after communism ceased being an enemy. "Fundamentalism needs an enemy. Their whole existence is tied up in deciding who gets saved and who gets damned. When the Berlin Wall came down, fundamentalism was floundering. Their preachers needed a new group to focus their attack against and to spur their fear-based fundraising. They made a strategic decision to choose homosexuals as the next enemy."

I want to believe all the words about equal rights I've heard on this trip, that this nation at large has a bigger generosity of heart than the hateful diatribe of our nation's most fundamentalist organizations.

Mel challenges me. "Look at pre-WWII Germany. Look what a few people did then. Look at fundamentalism today. Look at our government. Our president is working on a constitutional amendment to ban the possibility of gay marriage. And Virginia just last winter passed House Joint Resolution 586, which starts the process of amending our state constitution. It goes even further than the one-man, one-woman language for marriage. It prohibits the state government and all local governments from 'creating or recognizing a legal status for relationships of unmarried individuals that intends to approximate the design, qualities, significance, or effects of marriage.'"

Mel and Gary's Soulforce observations put questions to my own assumptions, and my ride. They live in the firing line of justice for queer people. Here in their midst I feel safe to explore my ride even further. These two could pass for Marine officers with their short-cropped hair, manicured home, and regimented cupboards. Yet Mel and Gary seem fascinated by my ride-at-the-margins experiences. They are as eager to hear my stories as I am theirs. I've paid an 840-mile entrance fee to their home. Now I want to learn all I can.

I answer Mel and Gary's questions, but mostly I keep my ears open to the stories that flow from them. My notebook fills with scribbled notes of events and names of people "you should get to know."

Later in the afternoon Jake returns. He's the Soulforce intern for youth concerns, living here with Mel and Gary at hospitality central. Mel and Gary treat Jake as their son. Already he's getting

a razzing for the gay bar he'll be visiting tomorrow, the clothes he'll wear, what friends are going along with him.

"An hour-and-a-half drive to get anywhere that gay people gather to socialize and dance. Isn't that crazy?" Gary asks me, then looks back to Jake.

Jake's main work this year is organizing an Equality Ride. Next spring he will lead a five-week bus tour with thirty students. The plan is to draw attention to the many colleges and universities in our country that exclude queer students from their campuses.

At the age of 22, blond-haired Minnesota Jake already has a long history of queer advocacy. He was the first person to come out publicly at his high school, and he was the organizing force to create the Gay Straight Alliance at his school, the first queer-friendly organization on the campus. Active during college, he attended non-violent protests at Lutheran Church gatherings and Jim Dobson's Focus on the Family Headquarters. Along with projects he organizes for Soulforce, Jake spends time at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University here in Lynchburg.

Liberty University is one of Jerry Falwell's great prides. With major funding by the founders of Amway, and by the LaHaye's of *Left Behind* series fame, Liberty University is one of the fastest growing fundamentalist colleges in the country. The news in town right now centers on the purchase of an additional 2,000 acres for the university. Plans are in process to rename the hill behind the campus "Liberty Mountain".

As I hear who provides money, and which politicians commit their support, I see more clearly how the new Virginia bill passed, and where support comes from for the national constitutional amendment against gay marriage. Jake, though, makes his rounds at Liberty for a very specific reason.

"You mean you really know queer people at Liberty?" I ask, partly incredulous, partly in awe of Jake's courage to make these visits. Mel has already told me about a film crew who came to spend time with him and Gary and how they got kicked off the Liberty campus. "What makes gay students attend a place so openly anti-gay?"

"Some people can only get family support if they attend Liberty, so that's where they go, and they keep their identities

in the closet. And then there are those gay students who attend, and who know they're gay, and who still believe they're wrong. They believe Liberty when Liberty tells them their homosexuality is a sin."

"What happens if the school finds out you're gay?"

"They expose you to your family. A lot of these families aren't very understanding. If you go into therapy, and you promise to quit being gay, you can stay at Liberty. Otherwise, you're through."

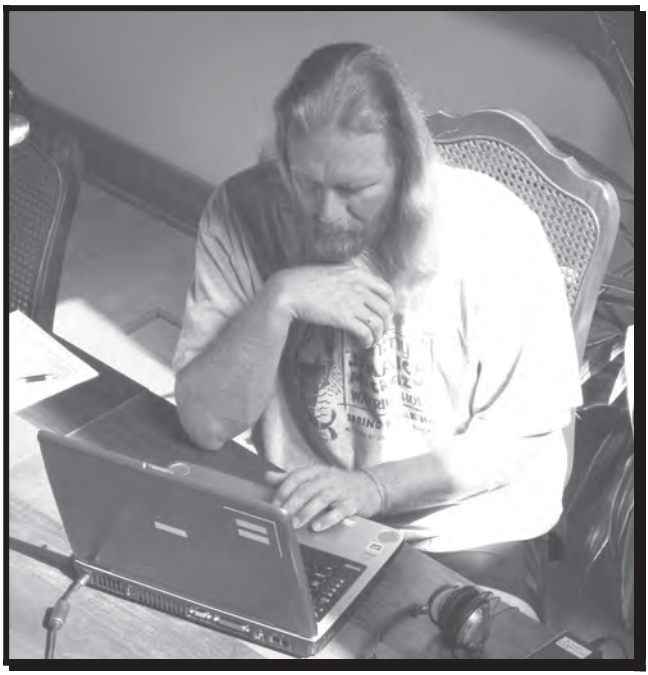
Later when Mel and I are talking alone, Mel brings up Jake again. "Look at that guy. Totally accepting of being gay, active in his community, and he's got a great supportive family. What a sight. So different from my own growing up. I was more like the Liberty student who knows he's gay and believes he's sinful and wrong. Jake, though, he's a vision of the future for gay people."

At dinner we carry plates out onto the backyard porch. Gary has cooked a gourmet creation. Mel explains this happens nightly. Tonight we eat pork tenderloin with an intricate sauce of cherries, cloves, walnuts and pecans. What a contrast to yesterday's convenience store hamburger that Softball Woman thought was killing me. Rain crashes so hard around us that we speak loudly to hear each other. Tropical storm Christina's arrival makes me especially glad for dry lodging tonight.

After dinner I go to my room and start working more on my journal. Mel is also writing these days, working a new book, *Religion Gone Bad: Hidden Dangers from the Christian Right.* He's writing a study on the roots of fundamentalism and the church's homophobia. In the storage room I take time to look at notes he has posted on a wall; chapter titles and major themes are scribbled on sticky notes. They have the look of frequent rearrangement. After an hour more of writing the soft bed feels too tempting. I close my journal and fall quickly to sleep.

"Spong writes for liberals," Mel tells me in the morning. "My book is going to be for evangelicals. I want to expose fundamentalism as a mind-set takeover, the third great awakening, this one leading to destruction. The first awakening led to the Salem witch trials. The second awakening led to ending slavery, women's suffrage and other good developments. This third awakening is de-

stroying us because it splits everything into camps of good against evil." From pilgrims and puritans to his neighbor Jerry Falwell, Mel's far-reaching book is one I look forward to reading. For now, I'm content to be in the company of kindred spirits.



Lynchburg, Virginia. Catching up on the journal.

After heavy rain last night, the morning feels fresh. While already warm, the temperature is not yet burning hot. Gary advises I'll need a ride over to Thomas Road Baptist Church or out to the campus if I want to visit. "It's on the far side of town from us, a good ten miles from here."

"I'll try to ride it, and see how far I get."

"Call if you need anything," Gary says, sending me off with the hospitality that surrounds this home.

Jen will arrive sometime this afternoon. She will stay for only two days this time. She's here specifically to visit with Gary and Mel and to try for an appointment with Reverend Falwell or his staff. Thomas Road Baptist church directs me to call the president's office at Liberty University. The president's office transfers me to the department of religion, and the department of religion refuses my request to get their view of homosexuality and the Bible.

If it weren't for the book I want to write, I probably wouldn't even spend the time to make these calls.

"And what is your position?" asks the coordinator at the department of religion.

"I'm in favor of full inclusion," I reply honestly, "but I believe it's important to understand as much of the picture as possible. That's why I want to meet with people at your university."

"Our school has a clear stand on homosexuality. These are professional theologians in our department of religion involved in serious work and teaching."

Is it my unicycle that lacks seriousness? Is it because I'm a Lutheran pastor? Or is it because I believe in full inclusion? Who knows, but I suspect what's really at stake is message control. My agenda is not their agenda. In this polarized and hostile environment conversation doesn't strengthen people, it threatens.

Given these phone calls I am surprised when I pedal up to Thomas Road Baptist church in the early afternoon and the front desk attendant replies that a pastor will be out to see me shortly. Shortly turns into twenty minutes of standing nervously in a corridor, feeling out of place, wondering if this pastor will also declare, "You've crossed a line." After the long wait a smiling white-haired pastor arrives.

We step outside to visit on this bright Virginia afternoon.
Our talking begins, but my nervousness fades slowly,
needing some paragraphs of introduction before
my voice settles and I push to the background

all the external homophobia that permeates the soil
of this place. Trading words on homosexuality in the Bible
I ask, "What about this inerrant Bible? It once relegated
women to the status of property."

"Isn't it nice," he comes back smooth,
"the improvements we have made for women?"
I add another word on biblical permissions
toward polygamy. He's silky, this pastor,

"James and Timothy clearly tell a pastor must have
one wife." I parry back, "But Paul recommends we stay celibate." He doesn't hesitate, "And look
where that got the Catholics."

He's drawn in another favorite scapegoat.
We could go around and around forever,
indeed we try a few more lines before
we end this talk. "The Bible's very clear

that homosexuality is sin," he declares. I echo back,
"The Bible's very clear on love, but not that homosexuality is sin." He has smiled with every word. "Come to church on Sunday." He now invites. I'll be back, yes, here to

Thomas Road Baptist church, where Jerry Falwell will be
speaking as he does each Sunday, calling homosexuality
a sin and a threat to America. I pedal out of the parking lot, past the church sign, barely believing I'm here.

I turn One Wheel toward Liberty University, feeling
a little bit thankful. We may not have really talked,
but at least we have stood face to face. In this divide
of conversation, what will bring us through?

An hour later Jen pulls off the road ahead of me and loads my unicycle into her car so we can arrive at Liberty University together. We stop to buy cold drinks from a convenience store and

start catching up on events. Back in the car I drive so she can take camera shots. I share Mel's story about getting escorted off the campus the last time he was here with a documentary crew. Both of us worry security will stop us and confiscate Jen's tapes. The president's office has been clear about their refusal for an interview.

Following signs to the student center, we park in front of huge pillars, check camera batteries, and walk inside. Introducing myself to the two students at the desk, I tell them I'm a pastor. After I explain my ride I ask if they will share the school's position.

"We talk about our policy in one of our required classes," says the male student. He seems at ease talking to me, but the female turns a deep shade of red. If we want to film their words, we have to make a trip over to that president's office for permission. We leave the camera turned off and ask what would happen if the campus finds out a student is queer.

"We have some gay students that have gone through therapy," the male student tells us.

The female remains uncomfortable. I'm guessing she can't reconcile the idea of me being a pastor with the purpose of my ride. Or maybe she's lesbian, and fearful of hearing queer words in this setting that could so easily become dangerous to her identity. In a place like this, it's hard to know the stories beneath the cover of conformity.

Outside Jen takes a quick shot of a university van logo. "Drive around the parking lot one more time," she directs. "I need a better shot."

I feel sure we're pushing fate, but she insists. We're shooting footage of perhaps the biggest barrier in her life, this place that would deny her identity, which labels her as sinful, and which scapegoats her for the ills of the American family and the American nation—this place where religion and government get stirred together in such detrimental combinations. We drive off campus with all the shots she can manage.

Both of us feel unhinged after the campus visit, so much glitz, so much contrived order, and such a distortion of lived experience. Perhaps honest conversation is absent here in direct proportion to the quests for power and control. If so, I'd guess very few

students, and perhaps even few of the faculty have much sense of what's behind these rigid conventions.

Mel, Gary and Jake show the same grace to Jen as they have offered to me. She sets up in her bedroom and then joins for dinner. Gary serves another gourmet creation, herbed chicken this time. Mel's background in producing films gives Jen a good partner to discuss movie making. She records video even as we eat.

Of course we talk more about queer justice. Mel brings up a book by George Lakhoff that both he and I have read. *Don't Think of an Elephant* worries about how political conservatives have grown to dominate the framework of national conversations. Lakhoff gives the example of when President Bush failed to get United Nations approval for attacking Iraq in 2003, he went to the American people and said, "Americans don't need a hall pass from anyone." That one line created the framework for the entire conversation, and helped justify the United State's go-it-alone approach. Americans don't want to be seen as the high-school students needing permission to act.

"Lakhoff's great, but he doesn't go far enough religiously." Mel says. "Fundamentalists aren't stupid, but they do believe in a strong hierarchical moral order. From that belief in hierarchy it follows if GLBT people disrupt this order, then God will remove his hand of blessing."

"Fundamentalists," Mel continues, "don't just want to prevent gay marriage. They want to get rid of homosexuality completely in this country."

I get quiet while the others keep talking, and I think of my Dad again. He says he wants to treat queer people with respect, but as a society we must not do anything to encourage homosexuality. My Dad is no biblical literalist, but he's not far from Mel's remark about the fundamentalists wanting to banish homosexuality.

"Feminism. Abortion rights. Even socialism. Fundamentalists are against all these for the same reason. They all challenge the existing hierarchy."

Mel talks about the fundamentalist language of God's hand of blessing. Maybe for my Dad it was more about growing up as a kid in Denmark during World War II, living with food rations and

fear. The fight against evil was so clear, and the Americans arrived as liberators. I don't think he's ever lost that idea of Americans as the good guys, or the idea that bad guys are always out there lurking, waiting to turn into Hitler as soon as the United States relaxes.

My Dad grew up with World War II; I grew up watching Walter Cronkite recite Vietnam body counts. During my growing up I watched college students challenge hierarchy and ultimately end a war. Is this where our difference comes from? Is our difference from the experience of my mom and dad's relationship while growing up? Or is it something else?

Whatever causes our differences, Dad and I fit the two molds Lakhof describes in his elephant book. Dad ends up in the "strict father" scenario, the one that believes in hierarchies and handing over our control to the father-figures who hold authority. I fall into the "nurturing parent" category, which believes in paying our dues to create strong communities, which in turn develop strong individuals.

If Dad were here at the dinner table tonight, our conversation would be very different. Yet this long conversation Dad and I are continuing through the years seems to be the same one Mel White is having with preacher Jerry Falwell, seems to be the same one Lakhoff is describing beneath the surface of our whole national dynamic. Jerry talks about the homosexual threat to the glory of America, and the danger of angering God. Mel keeps bringing up the cost of Jerry's argument, the body counts of hate crimes, despair, and suicide that come from trying to banish homosexuality. We all seem to be talking past one another, but we all keep trying. Dad and I. Mel White and Jerry Falwell. Year after year.

After dinner Jen asks Jake if she can interview him. She gets him rolling on his story of coming out, and how his parents have affirmed him, and the work he's doing now with Soulforce. When she asks what makes a good ally, he doesn't miss a beat.

"Believing what you hear." He then tells a story. "I went to a talk by Bishop Gene Robinson of the Episcopal church. He told of one time asking his audience the same question of what makes a good ally. At the end of the session, a participant came up to him and said he knew what makes a good ally.

"Allies listen," said the participant. "And allies believe the stories they hear."

Nine words. I know I have just heard the line of my ride. In every place where conversations have allowed us to listen to each other, I've found respect for human rights. Only in places where listening has gone missing, where conversations have been forbidden, where decrees are rigidly in place, have credibility and compassion been absent. Jen continues interviewing Jake. I follow the words, but my heart has stopped on Jake's one sentence. "Allies listen, and allies believe the stories they hear."

A week-and-a-half remains for this ride, still time for new stories. But I am already beginning to look back on this journey, remembering roads and temperatures and travel snacks and people and homes and the many colors of pillows I have slept on. Mostly, though, I am remembering stories, all the way from Sara and Danielle in Vermont to this evening in Lynchburg. I go to bed with Jake's words making circles in my head. "Allies believe the stories they hear."

Tan arrives on Saturday. Together with Jen, the two of them sit in front of the big screen TV for most of the day, watching the history Mel and Gary have collected through the years. "We've got people monitoring a variety of programs, keeping tabs on how much anti-homosexual rhetoric they say each week." Pat Robertson, James Dobson and Focus on the Family. Jen and Tan watch tape after tape.

I spend the day writing, talking, and napping. This is the first day since Manhattan I haven't pedaled miles on the road. Sabbath days make good sense. I feel more refreshed by noon.

Jen interviews Mel and Gary during the afternoon. Mel keeps telling Jen the story is in his book, but his words make good listening even having read his story before. Mel's passion comes from having grown up in the evangelical Christian tradition, taking leadership positions in youth organizations, and growing up to produce movies and books for the leaders of the evangelical and fundamentalist leaders of our nation. From a young age Mel knew he was homosexual, but from everything he knew from church, he knew this was sin. He tried all available methods to end his homosexuality, including electroshock therapy. He got married be-

lieving a good wife would cure him. He had kids and served them as a model dad. Therapy, prayer, lamentation, despair — nothing took away Mel's homosexuality. Nothing allowed him to fit the heterosexual model he believed in so strongly.

Most individuals live their homosexual closet completely alone. Mel was lucky his wife knew his orientation and supported him through all the years of this suffering. At the end of his rope, when he finally started to move toward his homosexuality rather than fight it, their partnership of love for each other and for their children remained strong. Their love and respect for each other continues to this day.

When Mel published *Stranger at the Gate*, the book hit like a bombshell throughout the leadership of fundamentalism. Their ghostwriter was gay. They had trusted their deepest secrets to a homosexual. Communication ended abruptly. All Mel's attempts to share his story with them came to nothing.

Mel's work since then has focused on exposing the truth as he understands it. Soulforce organizes around the non-violent principles of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., with the goal of stopping spiritual violence. Parallel to this work of institutional change is the commitment to provide safe refuge for those caught as he was in the vise of Christian condemnation. Beyond all the institutional confrontation, this is the work of personal story, and this work has saved countless lives. Once trapped in the mindset of fundamentalism himself, Mel has a bottomless well of understanding for others still captured by the death-dealing contradictions.

The story of Mel and Gary meeting is also in the book, the bright light at the end of a torturous tunnel. Like Mel, Gary was also married at the time they met. In the midst of the most difficult times for Mel, of coming to accept his homosexuality, he attended an Episcopal Church in Pasadena each Sunday with his family. One particular choir member caught his eye week after week. Never knowing it was mutual, Mel was astonished one Sunday, a year later, when the choir member brushed shoulders with him on his way to the choir loft.

Mel and Gary have been together twenty-five years now. They've gone through the pain of ending married relationships,

and the joy of figuring out their partnership. Their public face gives a picture of the suffering and the possibilities for many other gay people. Small wonder these two are so revered in the queer community.

Chapter Twenty-One

Moral? Majority?

ONE OF THE hard parts of living in the queer closet is the remarks that swirl around, which closeted people take in silence. When Soulforce started, Mel chose a visible way to stand up. He and Gary moved from Laguna Beach, California, to a little house directly across the street from Thomas Road Baptist Church. Every Sunday he and Gary worshipped at Falwell's church. Whenever Falwell spoke condemnatory words about homosexuals, Mel and Gary stood in silence until the subject changed.

When Falwell announced he was moving the church out to Liberty University, Gary and Mel decided they didn't need to live in that cramped house any longer. That's when they found this home for their headquarters. Still, Mel shows up to church each Sunday morning, his weekly vigil still in place. "Jerry doesn't seem to speak against homosexuality as often as he used to."

After another good night's sleep and Sunday morning breakfast, I get ready to join Mel's vigil for a day. He's offered me a set of dress clothes to wear to church. Instead I leave an hour before

the others, so I can arrive by unicycle. In biking shorts, purple t-shirt, and bright yellow safety vest, I get a cordial welcome amongst all the suits, dresses, and Sunday hats. When Gary and Jake and Jen and Tan arrive we take a seat near the front. Tan heads up to the balcony to see if she can film.

Mark Twain would have had some choice words about the TV camera jocks parading up and down the aisles, and the choir fluttering in like sky-colored doves. The arrival of the preacher, on cue, from the back, would have caught Twains' eye, and he would have penned choice words about the bodyguard so close to his side.

It's just like the church Huckleberry Finn attends during the Grangerford family feud, where "everyone stacked their guns outside before worship." On the way home Huckleberry listens to the family talking about what a good sermon it is, all about love and such. He gags the whole time as he listens. Huckleberry stands no hypocrisy.

I'm too much of a church person to keep all of Mark Twain's skepticism. Looking around I see happy faces, and Jerry himself has the look of a roly-poly grandpa. It feels easy to get sucked into the finery of this place, and the self-deprecating humor of Falwell.

"Where is he?" Falwell calls out from the pulpit, wanting to recognize an usher who has been helping in the aisles for fifty years. When Falwell spots him, he jokes about how small he is. "His wife says he eats like a bird. My wife says I eat like a bird too," he pauses, "like a buzzard." Laughter from the congregation rolls out like the chins on Jerry's round face.

Nine Points for Christian Living is the sermon topic for the morning. Strategies for being a better you. Jerry points to the row of unwed mothers as one example of people Thomas Road has helped out. Later he's pointing out the row of recovering alcoholics who've been helped.

After the points on meditation and prayers, the next points cover service and helping the less fortunate. A piece of me is glad to hear of these individual's successes, but another part of me feels Huck's retching. I have an image of these people brought to a blacksmith shop and then pounded into a new shape, buffed to high polish and then put on display in the store.

There's no mention of homosexuality today. If there had been, perhaps he would have pointed to some row of recovered homosexuals, just as he pointed to the pregnant women and the alcoholic men, displaying more miracles from the blacksmith's hammer.

Jerry preaches that the scruffy characters are treated like VIP's when they come to church at Thomas Road. This all sounds good. I even like the old-time gospel songs. The VIP reality, though, is that Jerry hasn't spoken with Mel in all the long years since his coming out. "VIP if you agree," seems to be the core reality here.

Jerry makes his altar call at the end of the service. This isn't part of my Lutheran tradition, but I still have vivid memories of attending a Pentecostal worship and altar call. The leader had come up to me and asked if I wanted to receive the Holy Ghost. People were getting that spirit all around me and falling down to the ground, so I didn't really want what they were offering.

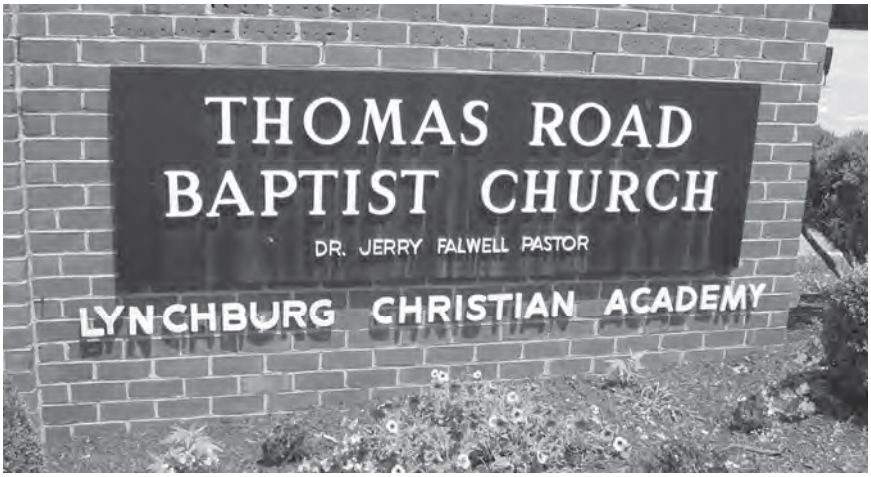
"I'm alright just standing here," I said. "I'm a Lutheran pastor." The leader looked into my eyes in all seriousness, then delivered a telling line.

"That's OK. We've even had Lutherans become Christians."

As I watch more people walk forward for Jerry's altar call, I think about that long ago offer of how even I could become a Christian. I've thought so long about the power and control that lurk behind the church's language of love it's not even fun to talk about this anymore. Still, I can laugh when I think of my elder friend Loren and his summary of the history of humanity, including religion. "Everything goes from mysticism to bureaucracy." Whether the Buddha, Jesus or some other founding figure with powerful insight, those who follow in the footsteps often spend more of their efforts on preserving the memory than on living the message.

The white-haired pastor I spoke with on Friday is here, too, smiling as brightly as ever. Watching him receive new believers, I'm willing to admit that good intention might be present here. Still, I can't shake those words which once offered Lutheran me to become a Christian. Not only is Christ the only way for some—only a particular view of Jesus is acceptable. All these hundreds of miles of unicycling are here with me as I watch this altar call. The

queer people who have been hated by churches come to mind, the ones who have been offered the possibility of becoming good Christians if they'll only become celibate or heterosexual, if they'll only agree to believe God's love is constrained by these kinds of exclusionary conditions.



Lynchburg, Virginia. Jerry Falwell's church.

I feel my agitation growing, but worship ends before I get more riled up. A moment later Mel grabs my shoulder. "Look. He's coming back. He never comes back." But today is new member Sunday, and a line of new believers starts forming to greet Jerry and the bodyguard up by the pulpit.

"Quick," says Mel. "Go get in line."

Tan follows me, holding her camera. She has filmed so far without getting stopped, but now the bodyguard comes over to

her like a magnet. "What's that camera for?" He's gruff, practiced, full of intimidation.

"I'm filming him," she points to me. "It's a documentary about his unicycle ride."

He grills her hard, has her play back some of the footage through the viewfinder, and then surprisingly, hands the camera back.

My turn arrives and I step forward to shake Jerry's hand and receive his big smile. I introduce myself. The unicycle works its magic once again, even though it's out by the front door. The clothes are enough, and Jerry seems engaged by my story. I tell him about my fifty-state ride, and about this ride, and about how I'm a pastor, and how I'm touring because homosexuality is such a big issue in this country today and I'm gathering stories.

The smile stays even after I mention my topic, but the eyes seem suddenly attentive in a new way. I continue, "I'd sure like a few moments with you to hear your thoughts."

"You'd have to talk with my assistant. He keeps all my appointments. Jerry points to his handler. The man is already shaking his head in large negatives, cutting this conversation off.

"I'm sorry," Jerry says, as if suddenly reminded. "I'll be getting tests at the hospital all next week. I won't be able to meet with you. You could call tomorrow at the president's office and set up a visit with someone."

Tan gets her camera shot and Jerry wishes me a good day. Catching up with the others outside, they're already talking about who they figured was queer up on the podium. My gay radar hardly ever works, but this time my hunch is right. The person is someone Jake knows from his time on the Liberty campus. Jake confirms. "He's gay."

They're laughing because they're so close to this scene, week after week, and because Mel knows this place from both the inside and the outside, and because so often they're weary or angry or crying. Laughter helps keep the days moving forward.

I'm too new. I don't laugh. I can't fathom how a queer person could survive here. Home after worship, I borrow Gary's computer to see what else I can learn about Jerry Falwell. The front page is Jerry's message, "Falwell Confidential," the "confidential"

words online for all to see. This week's article carries the title, "Another Group Arrives to Combat the 'Religious Right'."

Falwell reports a newly formed Christian Alliance for Progress has composed a "Jacksonville Declaration," addressed to the political and church leaders of the religious right, challenging and inviting them, "to return to a Christian foundation of compassion and justice, values that Jesus passionately taught and lived."

I'm immediately interested in this Christian Alliance. Falwell, or whoever writes his articles for him, starts the reply — the sole purpose for Jesus' ministry on earth was stated in His own words: '… for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.' (Luke 19:30) Any organization that deems to calls itself "Christian" simply must have as its basis the reality that Jesus asserted that salvation could come only through Him."

Falwell challenges the alliance to declare Jesus is the singular avenue for salvation. "If not, how can the name Christian be suitable for this organization?"

Rules or compassion, which will we choose? The choice is the same everywhere I've been, at the seminary, at the Assembly of God church, at the Metropolitan Community Church. Falwell Ministries and the Christian Alliance both proclaim justice, but there's a chasm of difference. The argument over which road blesses life keeps going strong.

Homosexuality and abortion are the two current battleground issues in Falwell's article. The alliance argues for "equality for gays and lesbians" and "honoring the sanctity of childbearing decisions through effective prevention, not criminalization of abortion."

Falwell replies: "The group is simply falling in line with untold numbers of past liberal church groups that have promoted abortion-rights, homosexual rights and anti-war sentiments."

First he takes on homosexuality:

> Here is a reality of the Bible: it clearly forbids homosexual behavior and, for that matter, any sexual activity outside the bonds of male-female marriage. The Word of God unmistakably speaks against homosexual behavior in Romans Chapter 1, describing a time in history when, as today, men and women

> gave themselves over to unnatural sexual relations. There can be no mistaking that these passages condemn same-sex relationships."
>
> The Christian Alliance for Progress can label themselves "Christian," but they are willfully daring to distort and dispute biblical writings forbidding homosexuality.

Then Falwell moves to abortion, admitting the Bible doesn't say anything directly about abortion, but, quoting Psalm 139,

> "you covered me in my mother's womb," he writes. "Bottom line: personhood begins in the womb at conception; and the Bible is clear – 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

Falwell quotes "Thou shalt not kill" when he wants to talk about abortion. When he wants to support the war in Iraq there's no mention of this verse. Instead he labels anti-war sentiment as one of the marks of the liberal churches. But Mennonites, Quakers, and Brethren take "thou shalt not kill," so seriously they conscientiously object to serving in the military. Those Amish people I met in Pennsylvania, they are descendants of people who went to jail rather than kill in war. The sweet feeling of this morning's Old-Time Gospel Hour fades as Jerry's contradictions pile up.

As Mel has already told me, the specifics keep shifting. Mel will openly say Jerry lies. Communism. Abortion. Homosexuality. AIDS. Syncretism. Terrorists. Liberal Politicians. Liberal Christians. Mel calls these the moving targets of condemnation. The river of words flow so fast that few inside the system ever stop to question. Of those who oppose fundamentalism, few can keep pace with the barrage long enough to get at the roots. Few ever realize the onslaught of fear-mongering is meant for exactly this purpose—"keep fear close to the surface."

Fear, says Mel, is the only thing that maintains the rules-based reality on which all of fundamentalism rests. These lovers of Jesus are fearful of the one great thing Jesus discovered in the wilderness: Rules and predictability don't succeed even after baptism brings a dove down on your shoulder and God rumbles from

heaven, "You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased." Only the shift to compassion can hold up to the confusions of the wilderness world we live in. This, above all things, seems to be what fundamentalism fears.

Fear and control is the flip side of sweet "Grandpa Jerry." Sitting in Thomas Road Baptist Church this morning felt cozy enough for a person to almost believe it held a place for everyone. I know from experience that wonders of faith happen in places like Thomas Road. But I know, too, that much of this Sunday morning is a front for the diatribe of fear, power, and control.

My ride feels puny now, running broadside into this age-old conflict that far predates Jesus—do we stand on rules above all else, or do we rely on compassion? Is there any communication across this divide? Knowing I'd be here on this tour, I've had Jerry in my mind for weeks, wondering after each conversation, each overnight visit along this journey,

"Jerry, If you could see the things I've seen, would you still say the words you say?"

Or does there come a time when we shut off experience, dismiss the evidence, and proclaim whatever calms our own fears, paves our power, and cements our control?

"What would you say Jerry, if you could have traveled alongside my unicycle this past month, and slept on the same couches and beds and floors in the homes that opened so graciously to me?"

I finish the Falwell Confidential and turn off the computer. Gary calls from the kitchen that lunch is ready, and I come to take my place at the table. Two lesbians, three gay men, and me.

"What would you say Jerry, if you sat in the presence of this kind hospitality? Might you really hear these stories, feel these lives?"

Is this possible?

I try to keep the light mood of my companions today, but it fades as I think about the young man who stands in the shadows of these condemnations, singing the choir songs about sweet Jesus. Nothing is really so easy as "Grandpa Jerry" makes it out, nothing so sugared as the melodies of the choir, swaying in their light-blue robes this morning. Falwell closed his online article wondering how "leftist theologians can read this dramatic passage and continue to be lost in their abortion-rights quagmire."

There's a quagmire alright. The rules don't work the way these fundamentalists argue them.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Heart of the Nation

ONE WEEK left on this tour. I'm in a car this morning, on my way to Washington DC, scared off any more Virginia roads. Tan films forests and farms while I drive. I have 120 miles left to reach my 1,000-mile goal. I'll try and get them in DC. Hopefully the traffic will be safer.

Dad continues to e-mail, encouraging my return to the mainstream, to the middle of the road. "Why do you hold up examples of gay and lesbian couples and say you'd be proud if your kids had this quality of relationship?" he asks me. "It reminds me of a college guy I worked with who kept trying to convince me Playboy was a respectable magazine, because they included articles on

psychology and culture. Just because Playboy writes about politics doesn't make it something we should promote. Putting your attention on evangelism would be a better use of your time than using GLBT as a vehicle to promote compassion."

Our conversations feel like quicksand; now he mixes pornography into his argument for me staying in the mainstream. Mel talked about the "ick factor" when people think of queer sex. I expect this is part of my Dad's response. The Playboy argument is one of many clues. I don't know what will change this for him, but here inside the Washington Beltway is a good place to explore the mainstream of queer politics.

Washington, D.C.

Even in the short few weeks I've been on this tour, major mainstream events have happened.

Canada confirmed the right of gay couples to marry.

Spain passed a national gay marriage law.

The United Church of Christ in the USA affirmed the right of gay and lesbian couples to marry, encouraged all their congregations to be open to gay marriage, and went so far as to encourage political advocacy work for this civil rights issue.

Equal rights are already mainstream in many ways; civil unions in Vermont and in Connecticut, gay marriage in Massachusetts, partner benefits provided by 98 out of the Fortune 100 corporations in America, queer focused television and radio shows, religious acceptance such as Bishop Gene Robinson, and the many national organizations who have headquarters here in DC.

Here in Washington, queer organizations have been working for decades. I have one week to explore how they fit into our society. Tomorrow I'll find addresses in the phone book, and try to arrange interviews for when Jen returns on Friday.

Today is Tan's last day on the ride. We use the time to capture shots from the Capitol Mall. For the rest of the hot day she directs me for dozens of poses by the monuments and landmarks of this city.

"Not as pretty as I expected," Tan remarks. "I have to keep watching out not to film all the fences and barricades."

The lawns are in tough shape, too. At frequent intervals military helicopters make low passes overhead. There's a disconcerting feel of siege in the air.

Near the Lincoln Memorial Tan spots a dozen soldiers all dressed in camouflage, wearing packs. They're fast-marching in a line alongside the reflecting pool. "Quick, go ride alongside them."

When I pedal back she tells me she missed the shot. "A family walked in front of you." Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monu-

ment, White House, Capitol Building, we keep trudging through heat to round out Tan's work.

Washington, D.C. At the capitol.

At dinnertime we're back to stories. Darron, a friend of a friend has called me and wants to have dinner together. He invites

us to meet at an Italian restaurant in the gay section of town. A lawyer turned church musician, Darron has chosen quality of life rather quantity of income. Tremendously popular at church, at public concerts, and with the children he leads, I'm reminded of Rip, back in Vermont.

"What would it be like if the gay organists quit showing up at churches?" I ask. Darron has been telling how he feels more moved to activism now than he used to.

"What would it be like?" Darron echoes my question, "with no gay organists in church? Church would be much quieter. There are lots of us."

Spinning ideas together we imagine organizing a month of silence in unwelcoming churches. Or what if allies pledged to withhold their gifts and their presence one month out of each year, until full acceptance is granted?

"Life is way better now than it used to be," Darron reflects. "The GLBT movement has made a lot of progress, but there's still so much to do. I know that tonight, somewhere, a young person is going through the same hell I suffered through for fifteen years. And most churches aren't doing a thing to help that pain. This makes me really, truly, sick."

Darron himself has been through the wringer, both at home and at his church. His Dad is a pastor, and remained condemnatory of Darron for many years, until Darron finally pushed the issue—"either accept me as your gay son or I'm not coming home anymore." They chose, at last, to keep their boy in their family.

"Over 4th of July I went to my parent's cabin in the Poconos, up in Pennsylvania. I brought some of my gay friends along, and my parents loved them. Every time my mom and I talk, she asks how they're doing. It's good to get to this place with my parents. It's been a long road."

Darron has suffered at church too. When a few of the church members discovered he's gay, they asked the pastor to remove Darron from his music position.

Darron hasn't made public announcement about his sexuality at church. The Church denomination he's a part of doesn't even accept women pastors yet, or women in leadership positions in the church. Even less do they accept queer leadership.

"I wish you hadn't told me that," the pastor said. Don't ask. Don't tell. It's still the easiest way out for many. Thankfully, though, this pastor stuck by Darron. A few members have left the church, but for the most part, all continues well for the parish.

The scars on Darron are deeper. His personal experience is an example of what happens to so many queer people across our nation. The hypocrisy between the message of God's love and the actions of church exclusion are too much for him to ignore. "I go to church now because it's a job. I no longer find it a place of worship. The music is meaningful but, unfortunately, going to church feels like any other gig for money, like going to play at a bar."

For decades people have counseled moving slowly when working on queer rights in churches. Some people point out how thankful a person like Darron should feel for a pastor who stood up for him, how far we've come to have pastors who create safe space. Darron still has a job, but only because of an individual who stepped in on his behalf, not because of a guaranteed equal right. If his pastor had not been supportive, Darron would have had no recourse to protect his job. Without equal rights, minority people are stuck with only the crumbs leaders choose to throw their way. The church's violation of his identity is a growing wound for Darron, not a healed scar. The churches slow approach keeps adding to the list of victims.

Darron and I met through our mutual friend Kerry, a seminary classmate of mine. Kerry went on for his PhD in ethnic studies, emphasizing African American men's studies. As I went through my trials at seminary, he'd say to me with experience and understanding, "you're getting a taste of what it's like to be black in America." He gave me a line I'll never forget. "If you want to understand a society, start looking from the bottom, not the top." As others keep saying to me, "The dynamics of oppression are the same everywhere."

Now, here in Washington, Kerry phones me to insist I call his mom and go visit. Tan has already taken off for home and I have until Friday by myself. On Wednesday I pedal from downtown DC to Helen's home in Maryland. She takes me out to the Golden Corral for dinner. "Last time Kerry was home we went here."

I ask about Darron and Helen replies, "I knew he was going through a hard time. I just told him to pray. I had no idea he's gay." She pauses. "And I don't care that he's gay. People who interpret the Bible that way are hypocritical. Darron is a gift from God to us."

Helen describes the interview process for organists and how Darron was the only one who could play the full range of music from gospel to classical. "We prayed and prayed he would take the job with us. You should see how he works with our children."

Helen chews down a forkful of steamed vegetables before she continues. "I would never call anyone gay. That puts them in a box. I think of Darron as a child of God. It's just like people calling me African-American. Don't call me African-American. Call me Helen."

It means even more to hear Helen share this wish after she describes her career of civil service for the Navy. "The Navy was the worst service for discrimination. I got passed over many times for jobs I deserved to have. But I never let that get me down. You just have to keep looking up and looking forward. I made enough to raise my kids. And now I have a pension to live on."

Helen just wants to be known as Helen. "If they're prejudiced, that's a problem about them, not about me. It affects me, yes, but I am not the problem."

Later, drinking tea in Helen's home, she tells another story of determination. Somehow it comes up that she has multiple sclerosis. I hadn't known. "It strikes when I get too stressed," Helen tells me. "So I avoid stress. If I'm doing crafts and I can't find a scissors or something, I just go and buy another one. I don't let myself worry that I can't find it."

Helen has had two major attacks of MS in her life. The last one was set off by a string of family deaths, five tragic deaths in ten months. I remember how this devastated Kerry. The string ended with Helen's nephew getting shot. "And then I saw a man in a parking lot getting beaten with a board. That was the last straw.

"I can't move when the attack comes. I just lay in bed and my daughter has to feed me and do everything for me. And then when I get sick of lying there and sick of the pain, I take a tennis

ball and I try to squeeze it. Every day I squeeze it ten times. Then I start standing up ten times a day. Then I start walking to the bathroom one time a day, and then three times a day." She continues her litany of her recovery. "Then I try to eat. My daughter makes my meal and puts it in front of me and at first I can't use my fork. I put my face down onto the plate and eat that way until I can hold a fork again. Then I start walking across the house to the door. Step by step. I never get back to full use, but I recover."

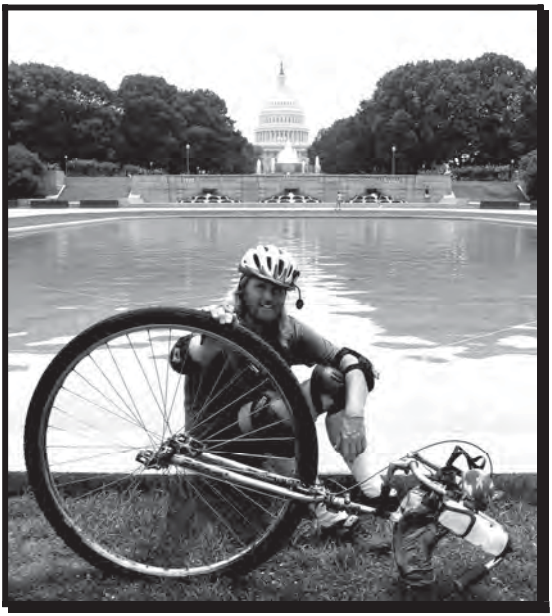
When we finish talking Helen shows me my room. Barbie and collector dolls line the walls. A couple of child-sized dolls rest on the bed. Before I fall asleep in Helen's hobby room, I lay awake a long time, letting her stories soak in.

And then I start thinking about the mainstream again, my Dad's concern for me falling outside the predominant flow. The mainstream hasn't been the best friend to African-American people. Slavery. Jim Crow. Civil Rights. Only the hard work of people stepping beyond boundaries ever changed the mainstream enough for Helen to have her career with the military, even with its tarnish of discrimination. The mainstream made its changes only with reluctance. Martin Luther King Jr. was watched by the F.B.I. and encouraged by President Kennedy to moderate his actions.

In some small ways, Dad and I are living out this tension between holding to the center and expanding the boundaries. Even though this struggle exists through all centuries, it's still not fun.

Memories help. I was in second or third grade when the city of Los Angeles ordered forced school busing. In fourth grade I became best friends with Steve Beston. He came to school from Central L.A., having to sit two hours each day on the bus. We were just two little kids who liked to play together, oblivious to the huge swirls of conflict surrounding our city and our country. "White flight" was common in my childhood, families signing up for private school to escape school integration. I was too little at the time to understand all the dynamics of what went on for me during my grade school years in Los Angeles in the 60s. Steve was always just Steve to me. I was lucky. My parents encouraged my friendship with Steve, and later with other friends of other cul-

tures. Tonight I fall asleep with the image of Helen relearning to feed herself, and her words, "Just call me Helen."



Washington D.C.

In the morning I start my ride back into DC. Less than a week remains until I return to Holden, to sleep in my own bed with Anne. I'm getting my miles in on One Wheel. Everything is looking good. Then my seat cover splits. The nylon material rips from front to back, exposing the fleece material that wraps the 12" inner tube, that holds the air, that has saved my rear and provided something close to comfort for all these miles since Burlington, Vermont. Three miles later I find duct tape at a hardware store and wrap my seat back into a workable arrangement.

Getting directions from people as I make my way back to the capitol, I talk with one old man who appears to live on the street corner where I find him. "Live and let live," he tells me. "You got to be who you is." It's the short version of Helen's talk with me last night.

And it's the short version of my visit at the Task Force, also known as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. I get some time with the intern there, whose name is John. He's from Michigan State University where I was once a campus pastor.

With the same determination as Helen, he describes helping to organize action in South Dakota. The state has a ballot measure coming up to prohibit gay marriage. "We're going to lose that battle," he tells me with the maturity of an elder statesman. "But we're in this for the long haul. We're organizing now so we'll have more strength there in the future."

I ask him what gives courage for this work. "You have to realize the fight for rights of GLBT people is the fastest growing social justice movement in the history of this country. It's only fifty years old," he says. "The younger generation is already there. It's only a matter of time until GLBT people have full equal rights."

Outside again after talking with John, the day is blazing hot, 95 degrees and humid. The papers are reporting on the heat, so apparently this is unusual, even for summertime DC. I stop at a Starbucks for a large iced coffee, a new addition to my survival list of cold drinks to help me through this heat: lemonade, water, pop, chocolate milk, iced tea. I drink more calories than I eat.

I get Dad on the phone while I savor the cold coffee. We stay off my "gay agenda" and I have a good time sharing about the DC riding I'm doing. Each day I take a spin around the Capitol Mall and explore a different part of the town. Yesterday I was at the Museum of the American Indian, spending hours soaking in the art and history, and remembering our family's years in Nome, Alaska.

At the end of the conversation, though, we can't help taking jabs at each other. Dad gives me his political report. "George Bush is looking pretty good these days," he tells me. "It looks like the budget is coming along well now." And he tells about an

interview he heard with General Myers about the steady progress in Iraq.

I can't help but reply that this war got started on lies.

"Lies?" he responds. "That's too simplistic. They were using the best evidence they had at the time."

Then he tells of an interview he saw about Karl Rove. The president's advisor is on the hot seat these days over whether he illegally exposed a CIA agent. "Maybe he'll get off completely clean," my Dad informs me. "The person in question apparently wasn't under protection at the time. The reporter even asked, 'Why can't those Democrats ever admit they're wrong?'"

Dad has a way of sharpening conversations. Too often I respond in kind. "Yeah, it's good those Republicans go around confessing all the time."

My coffee is long gone by the time we hang up, but I sit in the cool air-conditioning for awhile, just thinking. Perhaps Dad and I really don't communicate very well at all. Maybe this idea that we're still talking is more farce than truth. He's poked at me in every e-mail he's written since I started this ride. If his words were my guide, I'd have never taken a single pedal into gay America. The gift of my Dad is that he keeps me from getting complacent about what I believe, or what I experience. He makes coming out real. I head back out into the traffic and heat of DC to ride some more miles. The more full my head gets, the more I appreciate pedaling. After the ride to Maryland to visit Helen I have less than forty miles left to reach the 1,000-mile goal.

Earlier today my seat cover split. Duct tape fixed that problem. Now this afternoon my seat post breaks off. Inspecting it, I discover a broken weld. No more riding for now. Walking the mile back to my host, Mike, I run through the goals I'm missing on this trip. Back in Burlington, Vermont, I'd planned a continuous ride from start to finish, wherever it might have led. That goal fell when I took the ride with Jen and Tan to North Hampton. And then, I'd thought, how great to go from home to home, sent forth each day with a destination from the night before. I loved the idea of this line of relationship from start to finish, connecting both ends of the ride, through this string of people. While it's been an incredible bunch of experiences, Gettysburg ended my hopes for

going house-to-house with the little motel room Tan and I had shared the night before the 4th of July. In Virginia I'd given up riding because of concern for my life. Now the last of my goals, pedaling 1,000 miles, may end up settling for 962. It's turning into a queer ride, all the way around. My goals keep encountering the unexpected. All my thoughts about rules, and here I am, wishing for predictable success as much as the next person.

When I get back to Mike's he calls a friend who comes over to inspect the seat. "I can't fix that myself," he tells me, "but Benny can fix it." He gives me directions.

In the morning I push my unicycle over to Benny's.

"No," says Benny. "I can't fix that. You need Thomas's Body Shop. He can fix your unicycle." I walk forty minutes to reach the shop. Inside the building, the dirty front office is abandoned. Ringing the bell gets me a long wait and a chance to meet Eddie Thomas. He's in a severely sour mood. "Used to be car shops all around here. I'm the last one. Everyone else sold out to condos. I'll have to do the same in a couple of months." He looks at my unicycle. "No estimates on Friday," he growls, turning back toward his workshop.

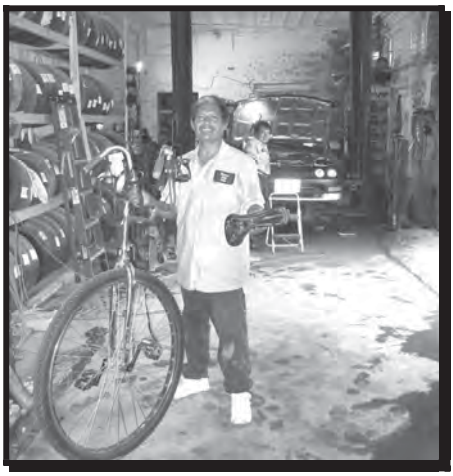
"Where can I try next?"

"There's nowhere around here," he gives me a final bark.

Nine-hundred-and-sixty-two miles? I've got a couple of hours left to find a fix before Jen and her partner Ann arrive for our last few days of interviews. A man on the street remarks on my unicycle and I tell him my dilemma. "Four blocks up the street," he advises, "Then take a right, and keep your eye out for a gap between two buildings. Look for cars parked in the back. There's a shop there that will help you for sure."

On the way I find a car repair shop and I stop to ask them for help. A man with a mechanics shirt labeled Jose comes out to look at my seat post. He calls inside to his assistant. This man also wears a shirt marked Jose. They speak together in Spanish and Jose Two takes my unicycle. I follow him inside and he starts working. Then Jose Three comes over to watch. We try our Spanish as best we can and I learn they're here from El Salvador, and have been in the neighborhood for fifteen years. There are so many people here from Central America they do fine without

speaking English. I tell them what I can about my ride. We smile back and forth a lot as Jose Two lights the torch and brazes my seat post back together. When I'm done, and when I've paid my bill, I head back to the hot street, grateful to be pedaling.



Washington D.C. With Jose for repairs.

Two hours later I'm eating lunch with Jen and Ann. Another gift. Every place Jen or Tan have decided to meet me, they've arrived as promised. Flying overnight from across the country, consulting maps, zeroing in by cell phone, we've managed to close our 3,000 mile separations each time. We end up face to face as if it's the most normal thing in the world to navigate around the globe like this. Every time Jen or Tan leave me, they head home to overtime work and catching up on their regular lives. Along with everything else, Jen is in the middle of building a house. Still, each time they join the ride, they're fresh and interested in my experiences. We have a few hours before our appointment at the Re-

formed Jewish Headquarters. Finding a place near DuPont Circle for lunch, I catch them up on the ride.

Virgina. Seeking safety.

After updating the seat post story, I tell them about the news in the papers this week. Reverend Willie Wilson's anti-gay sermon made the front page this week. Wilson is the director of the upcoming Million More Movement march, the tenth anniversary remembrance of the Million Man March on the Washington Mall. Louis Farrakhan had announced gays and lesbians would be welcome in all aspects of this march, but Wilson's remarks have raised tensions and concern.

"Lesbianism is about to take over our community… I ain't homophobic because everybody here got something wrong with him," He said from the pulpit, continuing with graphic degradations. "Anytime somebody got to slap some grease on your behind and stick something in you, it's something wrong with that. Your butt ain't made for that." Jen reads the clip silently as I show it to her.

There's also a news story about the church burning in Virginia. A United Church of Christ congregation was set on fire following the national church's decision to endorse gay marriage and encourage congregations to work toward laws allowing for gay marriage.

Jen finishes the last of her lunch. "Maybe I'll find the conflict I'm looking for."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Centers of Hope

RABBI Michael Namath is the first interview on our Beltway list. He works as Program Director for the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, just two blocks off of DuPont Circle. We're into the conversation quickly.

"We believe in honoring what the creator has created. We believe in justice for all," he says. "GLBT equal rights is the civil rights issue of our time."

Rabbi Namath reminds me of my meeting with Dean Cameron, back at Union Seminary. That morning in Manhattan, he'd said almost these exact words. "The doctrine of creation affirms God accepts us as we are created. Clearly some people are created gay, or lesbian, bisexual, or transgender."

Jewish. Christian. Eastern. Hunting-gathering traditions. Atheist. Wherever I find compassion I discover the same attitude toward life, with compassion at the core. Rabbi Namath gives me a line to remember. "We have the choice to live in fear, and we have the choice to live in awe."

"We're sitting in an historic place," he continues, stretching his hand to encompass this wood-paneled conference room. "The Civil Rights Movement of 1964 and 1965 held some of their most important meetings right in this room."

I ask this Rabbi Namath why gay rights are important to him. "It's a justice issue, and justice is very important for Reform Jews. There's no question in our tradition about our position for justice. We were involved last year in trying to defeat the effort for the constitutional amendment about marriage. I ended up as the point person for our efforts."

"And why do you put so much energy into this yourself?"

"It will be many years," he predicts, "but I do this for my children, and for other children, too. I want to be part of making a better world for them."

Jen takes over with questions. I rest here in thankful relief. My spirit feels so much better, seated in this Jewish headquarters and his Civil Rights historical room, than I felt back with Jerry Falwell at Thomas Road Baptist Church. Falwell's emphasis on Jesus as the only way to salvation puts him and his followers in a very small box. According to fundamentalist Jerry, it doesn't matter how much compassion or how deep his faithfulness to Judaism, Rabbi Namath will always be an outsider, unless he converts and plays by the "Jesus is the only way" rules. Jerry's rules for queer people are no different — always outsiders until they convert to heterosexuality. I'd far rather be a reformed Jew than a fundamentalist Christian. Falwell's work is about sharpening the distinctions between insiders and outsiders. Rabbi Namath is giving his life to make the circle big enough for everyone.

It's not just Rabbi Namath's vision I admire so much. It's his process, so different from my own. He seems patient and willing to work within the institutional framework. We're about the same age, this rabbi and I. Our kids are the same age, too. If I'd stayed inside the church, I might have found a job like his, a mainstream

job that would have made Dad happy, a job Mom could explain to her friends when they asked what I was up to.

Sitting here in this room that's so historic to the Civil Rights Movement of the '60's, my awe for the rabbi's life brings back the questions about how I live my life. He'll go home to his kids tonight. I've been away from my family for a whole month. He knows where to go to work every day. I start each day without knowing where I'll end up. He has a community he works with. I'll be working on words, alone, for many months, just like I've been riding alone this last month. In a few days I'll be home, beginning to stitch my journey together, hoping in the truth that the world needs all kinds, that impatience and individuality has its place, and that I'll find value in this experience once the pedaling is finished. I have no assurances.

As we pass out the door and return to the hot DC afternoon, the building seems to echo with Rabbi Namaths wisdom. "We have the choice to live in fear, and we have the choice to live in awe."

The words fit our next encounter, this one with a gay Southern Baptist preacher, one who used to play by Jerry Falwell's kind of rules. Steven Baines serves on the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's religious roundtable. He also holds the office of Director for Interfaith Outreach for another advocacy organization, People for the American Way.

Steven is good with words, in the best of his Baptist tradition. He tells the familiar story of knowing he was gay at an early age and believing his life was a terrible sin. He talks about the sore knees he got as a child from kneeling in front of his bed and praying to be healed from homosexuality, of falling asleep in prayer and waking up still kneeled at the side of his bed. He tells of suicidal times and then of finally coming to accept himself for who he is, a gay man loved by God.

"I didn't have the words for this as a little boy, but I always knew I was gay. I grew up believing in my sin. I tried and tried to pray it away. I joined Exodus (a movement to convert homosexual people to heterosexuality) for a year, but I am gay to the core, and now I know God created me this way. I can finally celebrate this. I can finally celebrate my love, and I will work until the day when

everyone can celebrate the love and fidelity between two men or two women, as much as we honor the love of women partnered with men."

A preacher since the age of seventeen, Steven tells of his love for the church, and the conflict of falling in love with another man. A while later he was outed to his church, turned in for being gay. In the fundamentalist emphasis between insiders and outsiders, he ended up on the outside. The church took away his job as a pastor. This happened ten years ago.

Steven lives now with his partner. "We've got an everyday life. So many people think homosexuality is just about sex. We're just like any other couple. I go home from work tired, and we talk about our day, and we care for each other, and we have a life together.

"My mom and dad still can't accept us, though. And I know some kids still go through the same thing I did. Someday I want them not to have to endure what I suffered."

Steven spends much of his time giving public speeches. He too, like Rabbi Namath, has a long-term vision. Kicked out of his church, he's found a way back to the center of two respected organizations. He has a voice in the mainstream. Maybe Steven and Michael are the mutant cells that are already helping the whole system shift to a new understanding of justice. Maybe my own questions about my path and my place will always be with me, but maybe the rabbi and the preacher go home some nights, too, wondering whether their lives makes sense, if they've put their trust in the right places, if their own insights are trustworthy. Maybe we can't really know the answers to these questions. Maybe all we have is the mixture of faith and doubt, blended with enough hope to continue the journey.

After the interview, outside the Task Force building, Ann exclaims, "I can't believe all these people we're getting to meet. I came along with Jen just to see New York, and Washington DC, but we keep finding incredible stories."

Ann had been hesitant even to visit me at Holden Village before the ride. She'd found the church too damning of homosexuality to want to be anywhere near it. On this trip she's discovering a lot of compassionate Christians. I wish this were the voice of the

Christian faith that gets heard in America. Instead, too often, it's fundamentalist condemnation.

Dad wonders why I lift up certain queer couples as examples for my children. It's because people like Ann have heard too much judgment. Because people like Steven Baines and Michael Namath are giving their lives to break down the barriers, widen the circles, and include all people. I want my kids to look beyond the barriers that create insiders and outsiders. I want them to have an eye for compassion, and the courage to follow where it leads.

I wish my Dad could get over his mainstream fixation. Aren't the preacher and the rabbi mainstream enough? The Task Force has existed since 1973. They have more than 50 staff members located around the country. To get to their sixth-floor Washington office I have to go past a security desk at the front of the building, take an elevator to their private lobby, register with the receptionist, read the waiting room magazines until a staff person arrives. It functions just like every other major organization in this city. All their people treat me kindly and with respect. Walking into their office, sweating in my cycling gear, holding a helmet in one hand and a writing pad in the other, I am more queer than these people.

And Judaism. It goes back thousands of years. How much more tradition can a person get than Hebrew history? Sometimes they lived as nomads, or as a kingdom, or as captives in Babylon, or as a persecuted Diaspora. The length of this tradition dwarfs Christianity, but the Christian dominance has resulted in some of Judaism's worst persecutions: the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, and other atrocities. Finally came the reestablishment of the nation of Israel after World War II. Judaism may be the ultimate mix of insider and outsider stories, of occupying the mainstream sometimes, and suffering persecution at other times — millennia of experience. As Rabbi Namath said, his work for queer justice is rooted firmly in his tradition.

Maybe if my kids spend enough time with folks like Steve and Michael and Ann and Jen and Tan, they'll learn how to ignore the boundaries and keep compassion as their most important priority. Maybe they won't need to end up on a solitary unicycle like myself, to learn that life is more than an either/or choice between the mainstream and the edge of the road.

I'm thankful Ann has dropped in on this tour in New York and in DC. She's finally experiencing the embracing side of faith traditions. What an indictment of American religion that she's found this emphasis so rare.

My host for this week is another Lutheran pastor, Mike Wilker. Mike found out about my ride before I began pedaling in Vermont. He e-mailed an offer to stay at his house if I made it all the way to DC. With his family in Iowa on vacation this week, I have the kids' room to sleep in. He's opened his house to Jen and Ann too.

Serving on the board of Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries, Mike actively works to gain acceptance for queer pastors. He's willing to help however he can. As he talks with Jen and Ann, they trade stories from our tour with stories from his own experiences. Jen brings out her camera again to film Mike as he shares his hope that the church is moving in the right direction. Still, he has stories of colleagues kicked out of the ministry, and leadership that has been too scared to stand up for queer people. He still smiles a lot. Like Rabbi Namath he has a long-term view of change. Maybe this is what it takes to survive in Washington DC.

Three days left of this adventure and then all that remains is the flight back to Holden and family. Saturday morning I join Mike to meet Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gomez.

In a rowhouse on Saturday morning,
I eat bagels and drink coffee
with the Lutheran Bishop
from El Salvador.

Medardo Gomez is here to testify
to Congress against the effects of the CAFTA
free trade agreement. Bishop Gomez
lives in the deep, prophetic tradition

of love-justice, poor-compassion,
that has characterized liberation movements
in Central America for decades.
Simple. No flash. Walking

with the poor— for the sake
of the whole world. After almost
1,000 miles by unicycle, I chew bagels
in a room with this man.

Washington D.C. With Bishop Medardo Gomez.

I ask the bishop's host a question.
How are LGBT and Central American
justice and other issues of justice related?
Pastor Phil swallows coffee before answering.

"Theology," Phil says, "is an abstraction.
It's always one step removed from real experience.

But theology tries to speak of a God
who created all things,

and who honors creation."
Phil says we are called to do the same.
"Honor creation, listen to the cries of our day,
hear the stories, recognize the call

to justice, mercy, and kindness. This is our tradition."
When I speak with Bishop Gomez, I batter Spanish words,
like I did with the Salvadoran welders yesterday.
I tell the bishop, "I know Jim Bodeen."

"Ah, " his eyes light up, "la poeta."
Two years ago Bishop Gomez was on a boat
to Holden Village with Jim, "Come to El Salvador, "
the bishop had invited "and you will write the best poetry

of your life." Jim took that offer
and it changed his life. Last time we visited,
Jim spoke of crosses, and suffering, and life,
and hope and justice, and the hundreds of poems

by which he's trying to speak his new reality.
"Quieres verlo?" I ask the bishop, pointing to my unicycle.
"Si." We walk outside. I show the bright Salvadoran
weld on my seat. I unicycle up and down

the DC block. After he watches
I ask a Spanish speaker to tell
this bishop the purpose of my ride.
After looking at me some moments,

he speaks. Another person
translates, "Come to El Salvador."
He smiles. "Come for some weeks
and ride in our country."

Medardo Gomez wears bishop's robes and carries the tradition of his church. He leads the church establishment and he carries this tradition to the far edges of his country, to the places of greatest need. He carries this tradition to the heart of DC to speak to senators in the Capitol building. I think Dad and I should both go to El Salvador. Together. To learn how the center and the edge depend on each other.

Dad and I could just stay home and read the Scriptures, too, but that doesn't seem to be working for us. I see Jesus on the edge. Dad sees the noble tradition. Both of us are scared by what the other holds dearest. We need the Bishop's vision.

On Sunday Morning, riding 25 early miles, I pedal past the statue of another simple man. Gandhi in bronze, outside the Indian Embassy, leaning forward with his walking staff. The words inscribed at his feet make the first of several benedictions for my ride.

> I will give you a talisman.
> Whenever you are in doubt,
> or whenever the self becomes too much
> with you, apply the following test.
> Recall the face of the poorest
> and weakest man (or woman)
> whom you have seen. And ask yourself
> if the step you contemplate is going to be
> of any use to him (or her). Will he (or she) gain
> anything by it? Will it restore him (or her)
> to a control over his (or her) own life
> and destiny? In other words,
> will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry
> and spiritually starving millions?
> Then you will find your doubts removed
> and yourself melting away." (1947)

"Your doubts removed and yourself melting away." We have the choice to live in fear, and we have the choice to live in awe.

I'm loving this DC week. Inside the beltway, inside the nerve center of our country, I'm finding edges all over the place, feeling at home here. My Sunday morning unicycle ride ends at Luther Place, a congregation known across the country for putting justice at the front of its mission. They have shelters for homeless. They started the nation-wide Lutheran Volunteer Corps. They advocate for queer inclusion. On a stone outside Luther place is a quote from the Bible, from Leviticus, from Rabbi Namath's Old Testament. Not the gay-bashing quote. It's not the condemning biblical reference I've heard all through this ride, about men lying with men being an abomination. No, this quote comes from the very next chapter. A second benediction.

> When strangers sojourn
> with you in your land,
> you shall not do them wrong.
> The strangers who sojourn
> with you shall be to you
> as the native among you,
> and you shall love them as yourself:
> for I am the Lord Your God.

What if…what if…what if…we chose this verse to hold as literal truth?

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Become Their Dreams"

TWO HOURS after I read Gandhi's passage and the biblical verse on how to treat the sojourning stranger, I cross the 1,000-mile mark on this trip. By evening time I reach 1,009 miles, arriving at the DC Coalition meeting I take a seat, feeling hot and tired, yet grateful. I've made my miles!

The Coalition meets under the banner, "As Proud of our Gayness as we are of our Blackness." This is the sixth organizing meeting since Louis Farrakhan agreed the Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community would be welcome at the 10th anniversary celebration of the Million Man March. Coalition members are steamed about Willie Wilson's Sunday sermon from the week before. Tonight they meet at Freedom Fellowship Christian Church.

Over mouth-watering greens, two kinds of chicken, and the best potato salad of the trip, I sit among almost one hundred others, hearing reports from the committees, all a prelude to the discussion time. People have come in large numbers to respond to the anti-woman, anti-lesbian sermon preached the weekend before. Some say Wilson is using the anti-gay card to rally fear and boost participation, just as the president's administration did with the Marriage Amendment during the election. Whatever the reason, this group feels deeply upset.

Some who were present at Wilson's sermon share their emotions. A man stands to retell an experience from when he was four years old. His grandmother took him to the store and the shopkeeper expelled her out the door. "'You know you can't use this front door. Take your little pickaninny out back and come in the entrance that's for you.' That," he says, "is how I felt again on Sunday in church."

The group drafts a resolution. It asks for an apology from Rev. Wilson, and also his resignation as executive director of the Million More Movement. This is DC, where people breathe politics. Channel 5 News gives a twenty-minute deadline for receiving an e-mail to make the nightly news. Four young men dash to a side room with a computer.

As the meeting ends, one organizer shouts, "This will be our Stonewall."

Jen brings out her camera after the meeting and we start hearing stories. A vibrant woman in her twenties describes the categories she occupies.

"I am a woman. I am black. I am a lesbian. Not to mention I identify with the Unitarian Universalists rather than traditional black Christianity. Not to mention I am actually African-Caribbean rather than African-American." She smiles at me, and continues with her crisp accent and precise words. "I am constantly working with people's classifications of me."

"And you're beaming when you say this?" I ask.

"Of course. This is who I am. This is what I do. I'm attending seminary so I can work with youth. We all must develop a strong sense of who we are."

“How did you learn this?“

“My parents. They always told me I could be whatever I wanted to be—no limitations because I was a girl.“

“But,” she continues, “they do not accept that I am a lesbian. Tonight is not just about Wilson's words. It is about my parents words too. They gave me the gift of not limiting myself, but they also agree with Wilson’s words about gays. This is why our work is so necessary.”

“Twenty years from now” Jen asks as she films, “what do you think the world will be like for LGBT?”

“There will be less hatred and more acceptance for LGBT people. But I am worried we will find another group to hate.”

They are closing the church now, so we interview Darrold Hunt under a street lamp on the sidewalk. He is the founder of Urban Philharmonic, “working to bring great music back to the city.” He laughs when I call him an elder, but his words, even more than his crinkly silver beard, confirm his status. As I’ve asked others, so I ask Darrold about the relationship between the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties and the LGBT equal rights movement.

“All movements for justice are related,” he says, drawing his hand through the air in a long arc, “all movements of securing rights for oppressed peoples, from blacks to Jews, from women to gays.” During the meeting he came forward twice with powerful statements about the need for structure, to build the long term means to establish equal rights.

“People have brought the issue of GLBT justice to the white churches. When churches didn't listen, white people created new churches, (like the Metropolitan Community Church). This is the first time we can build a structure to take the issue to our black churches.”

He shares more than I can absorb all at once, but I notice his eyes light up when he mentions children. “The most important thing,” now his eyes really shine, “is to raise children with the possibilities to become who they really desire to be, to become their dreams.”

“And why is that important?” I ask him, wanting more.

"Because children who are encouraged to fulfill their dreams grow up naturally, automatically, more open and more diverse, more inclusive, and more aware of justice."

This is the third benediction, the one I was aiming at all those words ago, all those years ago, all those miles ago when I first became involved in how to move forward with the questions and the experiences of queer justice.

"The most important thing is to raise children
with the possibilities to become
who they really desire
to be, to become
their dreams."

Encouraging the fulfillment of our dreams and our visions feels like a marching order, the most direct statement of what needs to be done. And start this with children. Rabbi Namath said we could live our fears, or we could live in awe. Under this streetlamp with Darrold, I hear a way forward. Justice will come when we stop living our fears, and start living our dreams. Old Darrold talks about children. I will try to learn his patience, because I believe his eyes, and the life through which he speaks.

The day is gone and the sky is dark by the time we pack up Jen's camera and walk to the subway to return to Mike's. After all the energy of the evening, the three of us say few words to each other, falling silent, soaking in the experience. We share our day with Mike when we get back to his house. I'm beat, struggling to keep my eyes open. Soon I head upstairs to bed.

Two more nights to go. And two last pieces of business on this trip, meeting with the director of PFLAG and meeting with the director of the National Coming Out Project at HRC.

On Monday morning Jen and Ann and I get in our last two interviews. They take the bus to the PFLAG office. I unicycle and meet them there. After a week in DC, these streets now feel familiar. I've learned some routes well, and I can choose between riding through residential streets or business traffic. With the time

Jen and Ann spend waiting for the bus, One Wheel and I arrive first at PFLAG.

Jody Huckaby welcomes us. He's the new director of PFLAG, having started just three months earlier.

"You're the nice guys, aren't you?" I laugh as we sit for the interview.

Jody laughs, too. "I like to think so."

"Everywhere I go, people love PFLAG."

"That's what I like to hear," Jody says.

We begin our interview and he talks about his selection as the new director. "Some people wondered if the director needed to be a straight person, since we're the Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. But I'm also a family member of a gay family." In Jody's Catholic family of eight children, he was the second son of four to come out to his parents as gay.

"It was hard for my parents to accept, especially my Mom. But, as the second of us gay kids, by the time I sat her down to tell her I had something important to say to her, she was relieved it was only to announce I was gay."

Jody outlines goals for PFLAG. The chapters all across the country are the core of PFLAG and he hopes these will strengthen and grow. "My mom didn't have PFLAG when our family started dealing with us being gay. It would have been a real help."

I like this Jody guy. I know he's busy, but he's open to our conversation time, even with the camera rolling. He tells about his years of study at Catholic seminary.

"I don't even go to church anymore," Jody says. "I can't. There's just too big a distance between the justice our faith calls for and the practice of the Catholic church.

"But I still believe churches and pastors have a vital role to play. In many communities they're the only resource for children and adults who are homosexual. That's the job of churches, to provide a safe place. Not all churches are doing a good job of providing safety, but this is what churches are called to. That's what the gospel is about.

"We've got five hundred PFLAG chapters across the country, but how many more churches are there? Churches need to be that safe place."

Five hundred chapters. More than 200,000 members. A golden national reputation for delivering life-saving care to the gay community. I'm talking to the executive director of a mainstream organization, but it was the edge that got this place started, a mutant cell that stood up to change the culture.

In 1972 Mortie Manford was beaten at a gay rights protest. The police stood by, doing nothing to stop the violence. Two months later his mother Jeanne marched alongside her son in the New York City Pride Parade, carrying a sign that said, "Parents of Gays: Unite in Support of our Children."

Mutant cells never know results. Mortie's beating took place in plain sight of police, and nothing happened. Jeanne's sign though, started a whole movement. As she marched that day, lesbian and gay people ran up to Jeanne, begging her to talk with their parents. PFLAG has evolved to fill this need, born of one mother's love for her son, one mother's refusal to bow to the accepted mainstream violence of the time. Mainstream. Edge. Then and now, the power behind the PFLAG story is compassion.

Jody talks to us as long as we have time. I'm sure his plate is overflowing with business, but he reminds me of Jesus, stopping his agenda easily, inviting in the wanderer, making me feel at home. If we had more time I could learn lots about how the mainstream and the edge benefit each other. Eventually we wrap it up. The Human Rights Campaign is next, the last interview of our journey. After goodbyes, we walk outside and head toward the HRC building. 11:00 a.m. and it's already scorching hot.

The Human Rights Commission. It's another mainstream event. They even have their own building in DC, a gleaming white nine-story structure that proclaims HRC's intention to work until equality is achieved. As HRC describes it's beginnings, "In two short decades, the Human Rights Campaign has gone from a small bunch of smart political organizers running a highly successful political action committee and lobby to a *large* bunch of smart political organizers running a highly successful PAC." Over one hundred staff members work here at 1640 Rhode Island Avenue. Founded in 1980, they now have almost 600,000 members.

Sponsorship is another confirmation of mainstream status. Supporters include Chase Bank, Citi Bank, Volvo, American Airlines, Hilton hotels, Nike shoes and Shell oil. At their annual dinners, they've had mainstream speakers each time. Former Vice President Walter Mondale spoke to HRC in 1982, generating national attention. Coretta Scott King spoke in 1986, saying, "I am here to express my solidarity with the gay and lesbian community in their struggle for civil and human rights in America." Vice President Gore has addressed HRC. President Clinton became the first president ever to officially address an LGBT organization. Elie Wiesel was the keynote speaker in 1989. The Nobel Peace Prize winning author and holocaust survivor said simply, "Those who hate you, hate me."

HRC takes a broad approach to equal rights: "As America's largest gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender civil rights organization, the Human Rights Campaign provides a national voice on GLBT issues. HRC effectively lobbies Congress, mobilizes grassroots action in diverse communities, invests strategically to elect a fair-minded Congress, and increases public understanding through innovative education and communication strategies."

And yet, Mark Shields tells me, "Of all the work we do, supporting people in their coming out is one of the most important things of all." Mark is the director of the National Coming Out Project, and he's come down to the HRC lobby to speak with us. "If every GLBT person was out of the closet, we'd already have full equality."

This is the last day of my ride, the last interview of the tour. I don't know if it will help my Dad's mainstream concerns to know that Mark from his DC desk speaks the same words I've discovered from the shoulder of the road, to know politicians, major corporations, and hundreds of thousands of HRC members share the sense of movement and the commitment to equal rights. I don't know if anything will help my Dad to see equal rights the same way I do.

Poetry Man has told me time after time after time, pushing my reluctant self. "I don't care what other people think. Write your own truth. That's all you can do." Here at HRC, they've got a whole department for that very project.

After the interviews, Jen and Ann and I walk together to the bus stop. This is it. They're heading to the airport, heading home to Seattle to begin working with ninety hours of tapes, trying to find their story in all of what they've recorded. We hug each other goodbye when the bus arrives, and I wave at them until the bus is fully a block away, absorbed by DC traffic. One more piece over, the documentary coverage is finished. This ride is winding down. I pedal another fifteen miles, just to make my legs move, just to feel the journey in my body one last time, until I reach the final measure of my ride.

Washington D.C. Boxed unicycle..

Total Mileage:	1024 miles.
Total Days:	35 days.
Total States:	8 states.

After a shower to wash away the sweat from this last ride, I begin disassembling my unicycle and boxing it for tomorrow's flight home. Back in Vermont, at the Burlington airport, I'd set the pieces around me to assemble my unicycle next to the baggage claim conveyor, and it had felt like an altar. Now the process of packing brings a quiet liturgy of thanks:

to every car and truck that safely passed me by,
to every convenience store and restaurant
that kept the air cool and the drinks cold,
to all the visitor centers, their maps and directions,

to all the hosts who opened homes, churches,
offices and organizations to help gather
these everyday stories of life in LGBT America,
to the ones who prayed for safety and adventure.

Eight pounds of gear in my backpack. Two boxes taped up for the trip home. One has my wheel in it. The other holds the seat and handlebars. This packing is a simple job. I've gotten used to traveling this way, but now, looking at my gear, looking back at the thousand miles and the five weeks, I feel amazed at how such a small pile of goods yielded such rich treasure.

Train. Plane. Boat. Bus. Two days later I arrive home, stepping off the bus to a greeting from one hundred people. The Straight Into Gay America banner I mailed home from New York City is held high by a group of friends. Others have cross-dressed for my welcome home. A gay cheerleading section waves pom-poms and leads a chant for me. Kai and KariAnna unicycle with friends, waving rainbow flags. Anne walks up through the crowd and we share a long and silent embrace in the middle of this wild welcome.

For the rest of the day Anne and I walk hand in hand as much as we can—in between talking and playing with KariAnna and Kai—in between the greetings of friends. We begin catching up. It's not as easy as I expected, either telling my stories to Anne, or hearing of her five weeks here at Holden.

Holden, Washington. Returning home.

When nighttime comes and the kids are in their beds and we climb into our own together, we let our hands and our bodies take over, helping shape our story back together. We feel so familiar to each other, but the five weeks makes us seem new again. For a long time we run hands over our bodies, kiss ourselves into intimate familiarity, move inside each other, and feel our way toward physical climax. We know how to help each other. We know so

much about each other. I trust this process of our reconnecting, even though we are different from five weeks ago.

Those times when an eye-catching woman grabs my passing eye and excites a sexual thought, I always come back to this. Imagining some stray orgasmic blast, of what it would be like to have sex without the wrapping of the stories that Anne and I have built through our fifteen years, I always return to this after-time. We'd have none of the honeymoon lovemaking from above the arctic circle of Norway to the Rock of Gibraltar in Spain, or the regular nights, or all the creative places and new ways Anne and I have found to love each other. There's no one else I'd know how to clean up with. Back at the beginning of it all we took that half-year honeymoon for adventure, and we told everyone our bigger reason. We strapped ourselves on a tandem for half-a-year to build stories—stories for celebrating, and also, when we needed them, stories to see us through hard times. Passing arousals have none of our accumulated experience, none of the times we've been out of sync and come through, and none of the times like tonight, again, when one or the other sighs, "that was the best ever."

I'm home. Side to side, I rest my face between Anne's breasts, my arm over her backside, hers on mine. All here. Tonight is not the night to wonder how life would be different if my story and my sex had wrapped itself into life with a man instead of here with Anne, how it would be so much more difficult to receive a public blessing for this way we touch and this way our physical bodies knit our spirits and our commitments together. Tonight we rest in one another, savoring the places our bodies touch and warm each other, and the cool skin in the places where we do not touch. Our breathing slows together. Somewhere in the night, one of our hands reaches out, automatically, begins absorbing the other through slow touch, we come inside each other again, filling ourselves up with each other. I'm home.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Shoulder Blur

"THIS IS IT," says Poetry Man.

I don't want these words. Everything feels familiar now, here in the living room of Poetry Man's house, on the tan couch where I sit on the left side and he sits on the right. I know the weight of the cast-iron teacups and the ritual of making tea. I've grown comfortable with the silences as Poetry Man works through text. I've even learned to trust him when he stops and gives me that look of his and starts tearing into text, scratching to reveal my covered heart.

I don't want Poetry Man's closing words, because all the coming out of this process feels small compared to sending the manuscript to the printer, knowing that family and friends and not-friends and enemies will see these words.

"I want my closet back," I tell Poetry Man.

"We all do," he replies. "It's the hardest part about creating art, putting it out for others to see, not controlling the reactions. Life is art, and the work is never finished.

"We're all artists," continues Poetry Man. "I love what your rabbi friend said. 'We can choose to live in fear. And we can choose to live in awe.'"

We sit now, looking at the manuscript, saying nothing for awhile.

"Does the ending work on this story?" I ask Poetry Man.

"Yeah. It works. It gets you back home."

"Okay."

We sit awhile longer. We're doing the ritual, shutting this project down, throwing the last few twigs on the campfire, watching the last flickers of flames before we break camp. It's time to go our separate ways again. Paul Palumbo and I are drinking coffee together every week, talking about church and about community. Poetry Man I may not see for a long time. He'll be diving into other words.

Because of Poetry Man I may never pass another closet without looking at the handle, battling internal conflicts between running away or looking inside to write words and free those spaces. I want to be true to this gift he's shared, to not run away, especially now when we're still together.

I reach for my carry bag that holds my other writing. I could leave these pages in the bag. Poetry Man did say I already brought the story home. But I know that would be keeping my hand on the closet door, trying to keep it shut, keep control.

"I've got another piece," I tell Poetry Man.

He says nothing while I pull out the sheets.

"It's probably just something I needed to record for myself." I still qualify my words, hedge my bets, protect my closets. Poetry Man knows this. I know that he knows this. I'm going to miss these times.

"Hand them over. Let's take a look." The glasses come back on. One last time.

"When you finish writing your book," Dad says to me, "you should put it up on a shelf for five years. Wait and see if your perspective changes."

Months after the ride, with the rough draft of the book almost complete, I am on a road trip to a Denver trade show. Our family

is living in Chelan, Washington now, where I work for a company, helping other authors create web sites for their books. One Wheel hangs from a hook on the back porch, a memory from summer. Dad has joined me for the trip, giving us time to talk on the twenty-hour drive.

We've talked about my growing up, our relationship, his relationship with my mom. We've talked about riding Straight Into Gay America.

On the way to Denver he tells me, "Soren Kierkegaard knew the importance of words. He would write and rewrite and wait for years before he published his work. Why don't you write your book and then put it on a shelf for five years. You can wait and see if your thoughts change."

"We'll see," I say, taking the conversation easy, thankful for words that haven't pushed our buttons too hard. I let the Kierkegaard remark go.

11:00 p.m. now on Highway 6 in Utah. The Denver conference is over. We're homeward bound. Eighty miles from Provo, Utah, Dad brings up queer justice for maybe the fifth time on the trip.

"I think the only thing we differ on is ordination of gays to be pastors."

I have four days of patient conversation going into this evening. I expect no difference now.

"I just don't see why gays keep insisting on ordination. I think they should have equal rights, but I think we can agree we should be promoting heterosexuality. Our pastors who represent us should be heterosexual."

Instead of talking about ordination, I probe my Dad's assertion that we agree on everything else. "So you think we agree on marriage for gay and lesbian people?"

He considers this. "I guess not." After a pause he continues, "Gay marriage is against what we should be striving for in our society. In Russia now they're experiencing decreasing population, and I guess even here in the U.S. we'd be losing population except for immigration. We should have equal rights for everyone, but we should not be encouraging homosexuality. I think everyone can agree on that."

"With the current definition of marriage," I reply, "we can't have equal rights unless we have marriage rights for gay and lesbian people."

I slow to 45 as we drive through Page, the lights of town a contrast to the winding desert blackness we're passing through. Back out in the country, sandstone cliffs appear in our headlights as we snake through dry canyons.

"What's the big deal?" Dad asks. "What rights are people so concerned about? Gay and lesbian people can live regular lives." Earlier Dad told me about a visit he'd had with a woman named Linda, a lesbian person he met at his church. She owns an optics production company, an interest my Dad shares. He told me about her company and her life. I remind him of this story.

"What about Linda?" I ask. "Is it right she and her partner can spend their whole lives together and then not be able to pass on Social Security benefits like Anne and I are able to do?"

We're back on ground we've covered a hundred times, and I feel the first stirring of frustration. Words never get us past this juncture.

"What about single people? What about Karl?" Dad counters, bringing up my unmarried brother. "Karl doesn't have anyone to pass his Social Security benefits on to. What about rights that aren't equal for single people? Have you ever thought about that?"

"Of course I have, Dad. I'm a pastor. I've been a campus pastor. I've spent a lot of time with single people."

Dad seems to think he's got an angle here. I'm used to this back and forth. I do the same after our decades of debating.

He pushes again and I reply. "If rules for single people aren't fair, then we need to look at that issue, too. But that has nothing to do with whether or not to work for equal rights for gay people. What about two people who've lived together their whole adult lives who can't visit in the hospital if a blood relative wants to exclude the partner?"

"Who are those people?" my Dad asks. "I'd have to meet those people."

"I've told you Dad. For years and years I've told you stories of people I've met and know. I've taken this ride and met hundreds

more people and shared their stories. Doesn't any of it matter? Is there no way you'll believe these stories, no matter how many I tell you?"

"That's wrong that people can't visit in hospitals. But we're talking about just a couple of people being affected."

"Dad, whether it's one couple or a million, these are real people. Real people who don't have equal rights." My voice is rising now. It's this part in the conversation where I feel my Dad fading away, the logic slipping. He's given me such a high regard for logic and learning and reason. I start reacting to his inconsistencies as much as the issue we're discussing.

Perhaps he does the same in return. Dad blurts out, "The world is not fair."

"These are real people, Dad!"

"Don't you agree the world is not fair?" Dad digs in.

And I lose what's left of my patience. "I know the world is not fair!" I shout back. What does this have to do with anything? Uncorked by these words, driving this midnight road, seated just a foot apart in the two seats of his small Acura, I start screaming at my Dad. "Why can't you ever hear these stories? How can you just dismiss these situations? How can you just leave it be and say the world isn't fair? How can you dismiss justice this way?"

My rant hits overdrive. Is this anger about all the stories I've carried with relative peace all summer long, crossing the line, hearing about sin from the religious community I've been part of so many years? Was it false peace I rode with, waiting for a chance to explode? Or is this about my Dad and my growing up? All my convictions about the edge and the center needing each other fly out the window as I rant on.

"There's no logic in what you're saying! You're not making sense! No matter how many people I know and tell you about, how much I read or study, nothing makes a difference. You raised me up to think and read and be logical, and then you say things that make no sense. You raised me better than this."

Even as I scream at my Dad a piece of me rises up inside, worrying if I was gay I wouldn't have the energy to keep this relationship going with my Dad, that I would cut him off and walk my road without him. I blow out a harsh breath of exasperation.

"Why can't you ever engage this issue and these people without bringing abstractions that make no sense?" I'm cresting now, just barely beginning to breathe. My Dad says nothing, stares straight ahead. "What would you do if I was gay? What will you do if KariAnna or Kai are gay? Would you dismiss us the same way you dismiss all these other people I've told you about for years – oh, there's just a few of them, or what about single people, or they're doing fine, or we have to avoid encouraging homosexuality, or the world's not fair?"

I push out another frustrated lungful of air, then take a few more breaths, hearing the wheels whining forward on this road. Then my Dad speaks.

"No, I wouldn't dismiss you. I have enough compassion I wouldn't ever want to lose you as my son."

I round another corner, wondering what has happened, why I exploded, whether Dad and I will ever talk about this again, whether there's any hope his unwavering embrace of me will ever extend to understanding my involvement in queer justice. Back at that seminary this summer the convener declared to me I had crossed a line. Perhaps I'm crossing another line, another river, tonight with my Dad. Perhaps he won't make this journey with me, and perhaps I'll stop trying to have him in this boat with me. Perhaps if I were gay he could get there, forced into facing queer rights more personally, instead of keeping conversation at this impenetrably abstract level. Or maybe our relationship wouldn't stand the strain. Would I have the energy for this long haul if I were gay? As an ally, will I have the patience for this process? I don't know these answers, but Dad has said the best I can hope for, "I don't want to lose you as my son."

"That's a good thing," I reply.

"Yes, that's a good thing."

The rest of the night returns to small talk, switching drivers, and catching naps. We gas up in Oregon. Another hour and the sun rises. In Washington, we stop again to fill the tank. Last night feels surreal. We talk as if nothing has happened. I don't want the story to end this way.

We move the car from the gas pump over to a parking space, pull out our bagful of snacks and drinks. Dad pours coffee from his Thermos.

"Dad, I'm sorry for exploding last night. I apologize. I don't think that accomplished anything."

Dad takes a sip and looks at me. "That's OK," he says carefully. "There are a lot of different ways to make a point."

It's my turn to drive again. We get back on Interstate 82, heading north, together, on the last three hours of this trip. We're traveling 75 miles-per-hour. At this speed, looking over at the shoulder of the road, all I see is a blur.

Epilogue

TWO WEEKS after the Straight Into Gay America Tour I board a plane again and head to the East Coast. Randi Reitan has paid my ticket and convinced me I must make this trip to Orlando, Florida. "This is the national assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church," she pleads. "They've been studying homosexuality for all these years and now they're going to vote about my son Jake. We need you to tell your stories."

"I can come for one day," I finally agree. "I've been away from the kids and from Anne for too long." A part of me feels grateful for this invitation, some recognition that unicycling at the edge of the road might have some usefulness toward changing an organization. Another part of me feels out of place. Memories of institutional tension course through my body, tightening muscles even as I try to relax and get some rest on my plane seat.

In Orlando I arrive at the Marriott Convention Center, where over 1,000 people have gathered for this second of the five

assembly days. "Giant Petri dish," I tell myself as I push my unicycle into this resort. Instead of *e-coli* bacteria, I see organizations – Solid Rock, Word Alone, and Goodsoil – new genetics competing for the ELCA's attention.

Goodsoil has granted me this invitation. They've arranged a press conference for later in the morning. Afterwards, I will unicycle for an hour in the convention hallway and help hand out leaflets. In the evening I'll speak with the gathered LGBT advocates. Otherwise I wander around, pushing my unicycle. Though my tour is finished, I gather more stories, looking for signs of change.

In the sea of casually dressed delegates, Word Alone pastors wear formal black clergy shirts and white collars. They organized in 1996 to protest an agreement of cooperation with the Episcopal Church. Since then they've taken on defending the church from "the homosexual agenda." As their core values state, "the Scriptures clearly teach that marriage is a life-long bond of faithfulness between one man and one woman and the context for which sexual intercourse is reserved."

Solid Rock Lutherans are indistinguishable by their dress, but I do see a handmade sign announcing an evening lecture about why the church should not bless same sex unions or ordain gay and lesbian partnered pastors. I write down the name of the room where Solid Rock will meet. This group formed for one single reason—prevent any changes to the church's current exclusion of partnered gay and lesbian people from the clergy roster.

Goodsoil members wear rainbow stoles draped around their shoulders. They're handing out these three-foot long strips of bright fabric to all who will wear them and support their work toward full inclusion. "We recognize the unconditional love of God for all persons and respect the intention of all LGBT people to affirm their baptismal covenant and claim their rightful place within this church."

Goodsoil is prepared for direct action and even non-violent resistance. I spend a good part of my day watching these organizers on their cell phones with volunteers and with media, adjusting plans as the convention proceedings unfold. They have a big room for their headquarters. Alongside of these intense planning

conversations, other people visit, laugh, and tell stories. I grab an ice water and sit next to a man with a wheelchair and an oxygen bottle.

"I was a pastor," John tells me. "That was a long time ago, twenty-two years ago, before I was removed for being gay." He tells me a complicated story of having served in a synod position. Even when it was revealed he was gay, most other clergy and synod members wanted him to remain. "They respected my work," he says. Still, he was forced to leave by the synod council.

"Why are you here now?" I ask.

"These are my friends," he waves his hand around the room. "This is still my church. I'm here to support change."

In the evening, a Goodsoil party begins. Dozens of us cram into the hotel room. People talk loudly, glad for the closeness of this company. I receive an introduction and an invitation to tell a few stories: heteroflexible Sara in Vermont; riding in the New York City Pride Parade; shaking Jerry Falwell's hand.

"You're the experts," I tell them. "You know much more than me about being queer in America today. But for what it's worth, I'll share two things I discovered for myself this summer." This is a nice crowd. I can say anything I want here. People seem thankful a straight pastor would be out on the road for five weeks, riding for queer rights.

I share how the Christians I met, no matter what they say about homosexuality, almost all finish their statements with the words, "but I love everyone."

A few people laugh. I laugh along with them, but I continue with why I believe this is important. "If we could just hear ourselves say these words and believe them and live them out, it would be very difficult to exclude queer people, or any people who have differences from the mainstream."

"The other thing I learned is that people in this country believe deeply in equal rights." I share the story of Greg and Willie from Vermont, and how I told it over and over again, and how so many people who had not thought about LGBT discrimination would say, "Of course they should have those rights."

"As soon as we actually live out the core beliefs we claim for our country and our religions, we'll have full inclusion."

This crowd includes many Soulforce members. I finish my time with the line Jake told me when I was visiting Soulforce in Virginia, the line I know I want enough courage to follow as I head into writing my book. "Allies listen, and they believe what they hear."

I receive a cheer as I step off the chair I've been standing on and speaking from. I'd like to visit longer in this welcoming room, but soon I need to excuse myself for the Solid Rock meeting. Sitting in the back of their room, still wearing my biking gear, long hair to my shoulders, I am dressed like no one else here. Two pastors speak to these dozens who have gathered. The woman speaker claims every gay or lesbian person she's ever met is homosexual because of an abuse experience in their lives. "Many don't want to be gay, and they can be healed." The man talks about the priority of scripture and how providing a compassionate church setting allows him to welcome gay and lesbian worshippers and offer them the chance to be healed.

Sitting in the last row of seats in this room I feel like I'm back in Pennsylvania, back at that Assembly of God church Tan and I visited with the elementary school teacher talking to me about the blood of Jesus, the love of God and how homosexuality is a sin to be healed. These speakers talk about love. They talk about compassion. It all sounds good. I see how people can buy into this, especially those of us who like to fix other people, who see others as projects. It's all so smooth: free soda pop, coffee, and tea; neat rows of hotel chairs for us to sit in; respectful, well dressed listeners; the talk about a homosexual agenda and its threat to church and the nation. It's easy to miss that all the words of love and compassion are preceded by exclusion and judgment. Scripture has declared homosexuality is wrong, end of story. There can be no real listening to queer people, no real believing of their stories. You get the words of compassion and love, but not the action. The only thing delivered here is judgment, and strategies for making queer people straight.

Back in the Goodsoil hotel room, someone has pulled out a hide-a-bed for me in the bedroom that serves as headquarters. Af-

ter a fitful sleep I wake early to fly home. Two days later the ELCA assembly votes down ordination for partnered gay and lesbian pastors, and votes down the blessing of same sex unions in churches.

Bishop Hansen gives the mainstream report, declaring the assembly a success, claiming the ELCA is a church that can tackle "tough issues."

The edge of the church is tense. Some Goodsoil members have said they're leaving the church. Others will stay in the Lutheran Church no matter what. "This is my church." A few weeks after the assembly I receive an e-mail from Randi, who had paid my ticket to the assembly. It contains a copy of her letter to the editor of the Minneapolis Star.

"Why We Must Look For a New Church Home."

> Our family has a gay son. We have struggled with the issues surrounding that issue in our church as our denomination spent the last four years studying homosexuality. It was a difficult time as the church discussed our son and all in the gay community as subjects in a research project. But we held on to the hope that through education, the day of acceptance and understanding would dawn.
>
> This August, at the national assembly, the Lutherans voted to keep in place their discriminating policies. They tried to open the door a little by stating the bishops don't have to discipline a congregation that calls an openly gay noncelibate pastor, but what remains is simply discrimination. It teaches society to view our son and all in the gay community as either sick and sinful based on their sexual orientation or as lesser children of God.
>
> We can no longer be Lutherans. We honor those who feel the pain yet continue to stay and work to change this church – but for us the pain is just too great and we have grown weary in this struggle. We need to nourish our battered souls in a church that lives in Christ's teachings.
>
> Our family has been Lutheran for generations and it is hard to leave behind our heritage in this church. Phil's family

has Lutheran clergy in all generations. His great-grandfather preached in Swedish many years ago in Minneapolis; both his grandfathers were pastors here for many years; his father started as a pastor at Oak Knoll Lutheran Church, and his brother's first parish was in Minnesota after graduating from Luther Seminary.

My family life centered around our small Lutheran church in northern Minnesota. My dad was a surgeon and he wanted us to experience the mission field, so he took our family to Madagascar for a summer while he did surgery at Manamboro Lutheran Hospital. My mom was one of the pillars of our congregation, as well as leading programs on the conference level. There was never a Sunday morning our family wasn't sitting in the fifth row on the left side in our little white church.

When it was time for me to go off to college, my dad said I could pick any college as long as it was Lutheran. Phil and I met and fell in love at that Lutheran college. We wanted to start our marriage in service and we spent a year teaching on the mission field in Chieng Mai, Thailand, through a Lutheran organization.

With thankful hearts, we brought our four dear children to the baptismal font and raised them in the Lutheran Church.

To leave this church, which was at the core of our family, is one of the most painful things we have done. But we can no longer worship in a church that treats God's beloved gay children as sick and sinful based on their sexual orientation.

We can no longer sing songs of justice on Sunday morning, knowing the injustice this church lives each and every day with its policies against God's beloved gay community. We can no longer hear pastors preach of God's love for all people when the church policy treats its beloved gay members as lesser children of God. We can no longer hear words of love and concern spoken to us in private but never hear them spoken from the pulpit or never see the hierarchy of the church lead with justice.

We have prayed for guidance; we have met privately with the presiding bishop, many other bishops, pastors and lay leaders; we have stood vigil at church conventions, written

hundreds of letters; we have helped with educational forums and luncheons; we have flown in speakers and held benefits in our home. We have tried at every level to see change come to this church that nourished our family for generations.

We are weary of fighting a battle that never should have taken place in God's House.

We know without a doubt our gay son is God's beloved. He is precious in God's House. Now we must find a church home that truly understands that most basic truth.

I print the letter out, fold it into my pocket and walk over to the lake near our house. Sitting on a bench, I read the letter again. "We are weary of fighting a battle that never should have taken place in God's House."

"Allies listen. And they believe what they hear."

Now the writing is done. For most of a year, I have risen at 5:00 a.m. to work on this story, then woken KariAnna and Kai for school and gotten myself ready to go to work. Anne and the kids have endured this process, giving rightful complaints that I'm not playing enough basketball with them, or evening card games.

Stories swirled in my head all during the writing. Randi, Jake, Dave, Sara, Danielle. Back at the beginning of the journey, assembling my unicycle at Burlington Airport, I wondered what I'd find riding Straight Into Gay America. Rip, Burgundy Face, Clay, B32. I discovered the stories the gay college student from Minnesota challenged me to share from everyday life in gay America. Sara, Mel, Gary, Jody.

When Dad reviews my manuscript he tells me, "You should dedicate this book to KariAnna, and Kai, and to Anne, not to me. They agree with you. I don't."

"That's just why I want your name on it. For too many people, the conversations have ended. Even with our disagreements, we haven't given up on each other. We're still talking."

"That's just why I want your name on it. For too many people, the conversations have ended. Even with our disagreements, we haven't given up on each other. We're still talking."

Dad and I are soon running through the same conversations as before. "Why emphasize LGBT?" he asks again. "There are bigger issues in this world that need our attention."

We are back
in that Sierra chute again,
no turning back, passing gear
above our heads to one another,

handing ourselves into each other, not knowing
where the crest is, or where the easy hiking will resume.
At the end of this trail, will we find
another green pickup?

Why emphasize LGBT? Again I remember the people I have met, and the stories I have heard; the hells suffered, the joys lived, and the long quest for equal rights, justice, peace, and compassion. I have my answer.

I think of my children, KariAnna and Kai. Whether they grow up LGBT or not, millions of others have and will. They will either hide in the closets of the past or live openly in a future with freedom. I don't know the exact route forward to full acceptance, but I do know how much I want to be on this journey. I know how much I want to arrive at the destination of equal rights and deep compassion.

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About the Author

Lars Clausen is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and holds the Guinness World Record for the longest unicycle tour (9136 miles). He received his Master of Divinity degree from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California, and holds degrees in Mechanical Engineering from U.C. Berkeley and from Northwestern in Evanston, Illinois. Along with his own writing, he currently works with *American Author* (www.AmericanAuthor.com) to help authors promote their work online.

Writing expresses Lars Clausen's hope to foster community and discover a deeper personal honesty. His first book, *One Wheel – Many Spokes: USA by Unicycle* is a "stepping-out" story, depicting his unicycle journey through all 50 states, exploring Native lands and history. *Straight Into Gay America: My Unicycle Journey for Equal Rights*, is a "coming-out" story, combining personal exploration with active advocacy.

Clausen lives with his family in Chelan on the east side of Washington's Cascade Mountains. Every morning he wakes up to the greatest gift he can imagine, life with his wife, Anne and two children, KariAnna and Kai.

www.StraightIntoGayAmerica.com

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Join an Advocacy Organization:

PFLAG: Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays
www.pflag.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
www.thetaskforce.org

HRC: Human Rights Campaign
www.hrc.org

Soulforce: Stopping Spiritual Violence
www.soulforce.org

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Enjoy the ride!