The American Landscape:
A Personal Reflection From a Bike Seat

> *"The real American landscape is a face of almost incomprehensible depth and complexity. If one were to sit for a few days, for example, among the ponderosa pine forests and black lava fields of the Cascade Mountains in western Oregon…and then were to step off to the Olympic Peninsula in Washington, to those rain forests with sphagnum moss floors soft as fleece underfoot…and then head south to walk the ephemeral creeks and sun-blistered playas of the Mojave Desert in Southern California, one would be reeling under the sensations" (Lopez, 131).*

As a society, Americans stay separate from nature in virtually every way possible. We live in climate-controlled houses, often venturing into the outdoors only a couple feet to get into cars where we then turn on the heat or air-conditioning. Few of us live in areas that have not been significantly altered by human intervention, either by urbanization, suburban sprawl, agriculture or industry. In many areas, the wildlife present is limited to a smattering of squirrels, deer and some birds; in some places the only animals to be found are pigeons. I always knew that I enjoyed being "in nature," but for most of my life that experience was limited to walks in the park, day hikes, camping in the less-than-remote woods on Martha's Vineyard, and one family vacation camping out west. I was lucky enough to grow up two blocks from Rock Creek Park – an urban natural area more than twice the size of Central Park that spans the District of Colombia and metropolitan Maryland and Virginia. This area, however, is far from what anyone would consider "wild" or "wilderness."

Two years ago, I decided to join a group of young adults who were biking across the United States to raise funds and awareness for affordable housing. When I decided to bike

across the country I was not a cyclist, but I held a firm belief in the cause we were championing. I also felt a strong personal desire to see the rest of the country on a deeper, besides the East Coast with which I was quite familiar. I was not aware yet of just how wide-ranging the landscapes I would experience would be; the pictures I had in my mind were rather stereotyped views of either plains or mountains. My group started our trip in Providence, Rhode Island and would eventually end up in Seattle, Washington. On the way we would cross thirteen states: Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, Montana and Washington. Although most of our days were spent biking from town to town, holding informational meetings about the affordable housing issue and meeting as many people as possible, we also took several days off to work on Habitat for Humanity build sites, in order to also have a hands-on influence.

At the beginning of our trip, my approach to each day was consistent with how it was on a daily basis; for instance, I was still used to being in air conditioning during the hot summer days. I resented the variable weather that could leave us either hot and sweaty or soaking wet and cold. I was not used to waking up at six in the morning and being physically active for at least six hours a day. The beginning of the journey was purely about me getting in shape and in touch with my body again – I had not ever had to rely on my own physical strength like this. I begrudged the often-difficult terrain that I was not physically or mentally prepared to bike over day after day. But slowly, around the second week, I noticed a difference in my approach to the whole process of biking an average of seventy or eighty miles a day. I began to wake up excited for the challenge of experiencing new terrain, curious

about how the weather would influence my experience of the day, and excited to learn about new towns and people.

One of the first new things I began to notice was not about the natural world around me, but about the immediate environment that I usually took for granted while driving around in a car, that now greatly affected the ease and enjoyment of biking – the quality and condition of the roads. I became acutely aware of the size and quality of the shoulder – or whether it even existed, in some places. I noticed whether the roads were smooth or jointed at short intervals, resulting in a bumpy ride. Most prominent in my mind, though unexpected, was my awareness of the difference that rumble strips make – as annoying as they can be when driven over in a car, they are actually painful when you have to ride over them on a bike. Though somewhat trivial, this was one of the many things I had always taken for granted about my surroundings, but made a great difference when I was actually out experiencing the world first-hand.

One day in particular stands out in my mind – we were biking in Pennsylvania, from the tiny town of Towanda to Wellsboro. My usual routine was to join the other riders in examining the topography of our route before we began the ride, which tended to leave me with a sense of dread at the unexpectedly mountainous terrain of Pennsylvania. But on this day I woke up with a new sense of confidence and excitement about the day – I did not feel the familiar sense of dread, but instead I was excited about the prospect of discovering new terrain and a new town. It was a 63-mile ride over formidable hills, but that day, instead of cursing the road for its steep inclines, I started to pay full attention to the areas I was biking by – lush valleys, a fast-running river, the quiet forests. I spent my time focusing on the nature I was traveling through, which was surprisingly different than that of my home state of

Maryland, though only a state away. Before I knew it, we were entering the quaint little town that was our destination for the night. This was the first real experience of "flow" I had while biking, though it would thankfully not be my last.

I had been diligently keeping a journal throughout my trip, and I noticed a change in my writing after that day into Wellsboro. I stopped needing to write myself motivational messages like, "it will get better" and "take it one day at a time," and I started commenting more on the areas we were biking through. In one entry I noted that some of the hills were so close together and consistent that the speed you picked up going down one would propel you most of the way up the next. I had stopped working against the hills, and begun working with them. I noted the significant shift in terrain and plant life upon entering Ohio – it was significantly flatter and less green, with more agricultural land, and very few forests. We traveled though Amish country, where horse-pulled plows and buggies were commonplace, and the produce was pesticide free. I recorded the surreal experience of pedaling up a hill in rural Ohio and having to call ahead to the buggy in front of me to let them know I would be passing them.

As we continued across the Midwest and into the plains, the main changes in the land were based on the crops being grown – corn, wheat, soybeans, hay, or pastures for cattle grazing. It was surprising for me to realize that so little of the land was in its natural form; nearly every acre had been plowed, leveled or otherwise altered for human benefit. I had known the middle of the country would be dominated by farmland, of course, but it was hard for me to even imagine what the landscape was like before this vast human intervention. Another joy we were introduced to in the plains was the wind, which could either make or break a day of riding. At your back, a tailwind can almost double your speed with no extra

effort, but a headwind working directly against you can easily cut it in half, or worse, making every pedal a struggle. From Indiana to Wyoming, the wind was our greatest challenger, particularly when coupled with the hot, blistering sun that is standard fare in the summer months. Luckily the plains were generally good to us, and I found a great love for the gently rolling hills of Iowa. Although these hills still posed some challenges, they were just enough to keep the ride interesting, while not being physically and mentally exhausting. I began to actually enjoy pedaling up the hills – something I could have never imagined – as it gave me a sense of connection and oneness with the land that I was not previously able to feel.

This sense of oneness was furthered by a group decision to rise with the sun every morning, a plan we dubbed "solar time." Our wake up call would be whenever the sun was reported to rise that day – anywhere from 4:43 am to 6:27 am. At first this idea was met with much protest – it was often earlier than we were used to waking up, but as a group we also struggled with the idea of being at the mercy of this natural cycle that we had ignored so fervently as a society all our lives. But after a couple days, I embraced the idea, and most other riders did as well, and it turned out that not only was it nice to get on the road before the sun had starting heating up the day, but it felt good to be on a schedule dictated by Mother Nature. Everything about our daily routine was dependent upon the natural world that we worked so hard at every other time in our lives to be independent from.

By the time we entered Wyoming, the mountains in the distance became a daily feature – we slowly got closer and closer to the towering Rocky Mountains. The most beautiful ride I experienced was biking into Jackson Hole from Pinedale, Wyoming. The morning started with a gentle mountain pass that took us by fields of wildflowers dotted with bison – the first we had pedaled by up close. We passed a riverbed where herons were

serenely fishing, and in no time it seemed that we had reached the top of the pass that began our ride. The descent into the Teton Valley remains to this day to be the most beautiful scene I have witnessed, especially so personally. We were suddenly descending into a lush valley, with the most pristine, tall, snow-capped mountains extending up around us on all sides. The purplish mountains were covered in lush greenery, set against the piercing blue sky, speckled with fluffy white clouds. We seemed to be traveling deeper and deeper into the most perfect valley for more than twenty peaceful miles. The nature around me was so beautiful and felt so perfect, I never wanted it to end, and yet I also felt as though I was a part of it.

Our next day of biking was a very different experience – although we were still surrounded by picturesque scenery, we were also faced with the daunting task of climbing Teton Pass, which involves a more two-thousand foot change in elevation over a five-mile span, so the majority of the hill is graded at 10%. We were biking up the slender shoulder on the same road that cars and trucks huff and puff up all day when traveling through the mountains; I was satisfied in knowing that I was making the trek using my own strength and stamina. At the top of the pass, all thirty bikers were congregated, proud of our accomplishment as a group. Several cars stopped to marvel at our accomplishment, and generously donated to our cause. It was at this time that I truly realized how unique an experience I was having – so few people in this country can say they know the nation's landscape in such a complete and intimate way, and so few have ever relied so fully upon their bodies for transportation.

For the majority of our trip, I biked in a small group, or with at least one other person, both for safety and company. There was one day, however, that I had the strong desire to start out on my own, and really share the day's ride with only myself and the nature around me.

This happened to be in Montana, from Hebgen Lake to Bozeman, on our longest ride of the trip – 112 miles. The morning started out with a strong tailwind, making the first 40 or 50 miles through barren rolling hills go by remarkably quickly. I had time to notice the brush plants that dotted the dry, sandy terrain, and to really take in the difference the lack of trees makes in the overall landscape. After the lunch stop around the halfway point, I again started out on my own, and was quickly climbing a mountain pass, but one that was very different than most we had previously experienced. I was not pedaling up a tree-covered mountain in the middle of a temperate forest, but instead a dry, barren, and very steep hill. This was a very different climbing experience, making it all the more satisfying when I made it to the top on my own, and leaving me with a new definition for what I called a mountain. Soon the terrain changed again, and I was biking along a road that curved along with the Madison River, surrounded on both sides by low, rocky hills and low-lying brush. The rushing rapids running next to me motivated me to keep biking at their pace through the valleys, over rolling hills, and eventually leading down into the city of Bozeman. I arrived at the church where we would be staying towards the head of the pack of riders – an unusual feat for me considering the superior experience of many of the other riders. I had made it through the longest day of riding, over greatly varying terrain, under the hot sun, and I had done so all on my own. I felt such a great sense of accomplishment and connection with those one hundred and twelve miles I had so intimately experienced that I was not even immediately ready to talk to the rest of the group. Instead I reflected in my journal about the day, and how greatly my outlook on biking, and life, had changed since the beginning of our trip.

During our last days through the Cascade Mountains, we were able to camp out under the stars. This seemed a fitting end to our journey – we enjoyed the nature we were immersed

in, and each other's company for those last few days of riding. The most jarring experience for me came after we had reached Seattle, explored the city for a couple of days, and said our goodbyes. I had not really thought about what the experience of flying home would be like until it actually came time to board the plane. I had just spent the past nine weeks of my life on a bicycle, which was now in pieces in a box being shipped back to the East Coast. Over those nine weeks, I biked nearly 3,800 miles, across thirteen states, up and down countless hills and mountains, through innumerable towns, and across almost all types of terrain that exist in the United States. Yet now I was about to sit on a plane and spend five short hours flying back to where I began. I had an instinctually negative reaction to this idea, and could barely stand the thought of actually boarding the flight. I felt that getting on that plane would send me back to the life I knew before this amazing experience; I was afraid it would erase all of the amazing things I had learned along this journey.

As I sat with my eyes glued to the tiny airplane window and watched the mountains, the pastures, the cornfields and the forests fly by, I realized that I probably knew them all more intimately than anyone else in the plane, and that was not something I would just forget when I returned home. I had had a uniquely "wild" experience, leaving me with a strong bond with nature that could not easily be broken. Lopez wrote on the lack of connection to wilderness due to modern technology that we now take for granted, perpetuating the separation we as a society feel from the natural world:

> *"It is now possible for…someone in San Francisco to travel to Atlanta in a few hours with no worry of how formidable might be crossings of the Great Basin Desert or the Mississippi River…" (Lopez, 134).*

I knew going into this trip that it would be life changing, but I did not realize fully that it would change me in so many unexpected ways. I will forever cherish that summer I spent on my bike, exploring the natural world that we hold so separate from day-to-day modern life. Although we were pedaling on man-made roads and bridges, this experience provided me with an invaluable experience of the amazing nature that can be found all across the country, if you only take the time to notice it.

Works Cited

Lopez, B. (1999). *About this life: Journeys on the threshold of memory*. New York: Vintage Books.