

Rhythm

by

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“I can’t follow Lance Armstrong up the hill, and you can’t follow me up the hill, but none of that matters. The only thing that matters is that everybody can get up the hill.”

Those words, from my beloved partner on the extended bike tour of life, were how it started, although it started late, almost too late, later than you’d think: I’d been training for months, doing all kinds of rides week in and week out, trails, roads, fully loaded camping overnights, avoiding traffic, looking for traffic, commuting my ass off to work, pedaling to nowhere on the trainer in front of the TV.

But here it was Halloween Day 2009, with time running out. Riding on the shoulder of the road on a busy stretch of Route 40 just west of Frederick, Maryland, looking at an uphill grade not unlike a wall and as long as a couple of football fields end-to-end; I’m in a teensy-weensy gear, one that requires three or four turns just to take me the distance of a healthy footstep, and I’m breathing so hard and fast and wretched I’m thinking I might any moment seize up and fall over, and indeed if I ease up pedaling even a smidge I might do just that because I’m going as slow as you can go on a bike and not fall down. My heart rate, according to the little computer on my handlebars, is meanwhile screaming along at 165.

And Jim's words haven't happened yet. They're still in my future. I haven't even imagined them, they're beyond imagining as I lash helplessly against the thought *I will never make it in Hawaii like this*, Hawaii, land of giant volcanoes fused together. Steep volcanoes, with roads draped across them like afterthoughts.

I am not a wimp. I am a fifty-one-and-a-half-year-old short little woman. My heart, lungs, and legs are smaller than a man's. For the sake of full disclosure I am also no athlete. As a kid I was always solidly in the middle of the picking pack when we were chosen for teams one at a time by that ruthless grade school method. More importantly, this is all Jim's fault. I blame him completely, or almost completely—I reserve a final, bitter, tragic drop of self-blame for my own sorry part in this.

I blame him for the overall predicament, but also, at this moment, more acutely and particularly for the latest scheme he's offered as my bike trainer/philosopher. It must be said that we turned to this new strategy in desperation after my previous pathetic attempts at riding up mountains (although Jim puts a nonchalant face on it, a key feature of his teaching style, cool and unruffled to the end). The plan is that, instead of my previous approach of spin-spin-spin in my lowest gear, I should spin a bit more slowly in a bit bigger gear. Maybe this will be the trick, Jim says. It's the more typical way to climb, he says. Aim for a cadence around sixty pedal strokes per minute. Find your rhythm.

I count *one one thousand, two one thousand* as my legs go round and round. But I can't maintain it, I can't pedal quite that fast even in this small gear, I can't do it. I can't do it. I can't do it.

I do it of course, but it's your textbook pyrrhic victory. I do it because I always do it, I struggle in despair to the top, enjoying the whole way my own private hell, and sure I can do it

on this one hill, or a couple of them, but I won't be up for much more of this before I'm ready for the car and the long ride home, and this will never do in Hawaii, no, we both know that, it will never do when you're all day long on those hills and you've got thirty pounds of gear on your racks to boot and you're supposed to be having a wonderful time, time of your life, trip of a lifetime, it's going to be so great.

Bike training books talk in the most jargon-y way about interval training, tempo riding, anaerobic thresholds, VO2 max, aerobic base, red zones, etc. I can't stand it. I've waded through that stuff and I've never found the page that says, *You can do it. Really, you can. Here's how.*

'Here's how' is the toast Jim and I always raise to each other—wine with dinner, or gin and tonics back when summer was still breathing warm in our hair—since seeing people do it in the 1950 film noir classic *The Asphalt Jungle*. Later, we saw the same toast in an episode of *Mad Men*, which made us feel clever and pleased with ourselves. But I was a long way from thinking I'd ever know the way how—and a long way from toasting anything—on that hill on Route 40, with the cars roaring past me and the rocks and glass on the shoulder like an obstacle course and the nasty crosswind blowing dust in my face and the smell of some dead rodent in my nostrils.

Jim was of the opinion my heart rate was too high. Duh! He told me to just slow down a little.

Slow down?

He suggested I try backing off a bit.

So I did.

It was the next hill's turn. I stared up at it and I said *eff-you-see-kay it*. Forget the cadence of sixty, forget worrying about what gear you're in. Just keep one eye on the heart rate monitor and one eye on the road ahead but not too far ahead because you don't need to know how long this hill is saying it's going to last. Settle into the heart rate that feels sustainable—not exactly comfortable, not your heart rate for walking out to check the mail or trudging up stairs or even thumping along on the treadmill, it's higher than all that but it's not so high you feel like you're *dying*—settle in and watch it on the heart rate monitor, keep it there, feel it, make friends with it. For me, it was the high 140s to around 155, a far cry, those ten slender beats, from the 165 that had made me so unhappy. Sustainable, maintainable is a great thing because some of these hills can take a half hour or more to climb, especially at the slow speeds I manage. And how slow! As I'm churning away up the hill I hear the words of the guru at the bike shop, Charles, some conversation we had about the wisdom or foolishness of equipping a bicycle with super-low gearing and he's saying *faster at that point to get off your bike and walk*. Of course he would say that, he of the single-speed mountain bike, grizzly-bear build and legs like tree trunks, but ouch, how I do *not* need to remember such comments now. The cars zipping past are like that episode of *Star Trek*, the one in which Kirk and Spock got sped up to where they were too fast to detect alongside everything else which by comparison was standing stock-still. The cars are like fast Kirk and Spock and I am a frozen statue of a woman on a bike, poised eternally on the shoulder of the road.

It doesn't matter. The beauty part is that I am not moving any slower, at least not that I can tell, than I did when I cranked along in the 160s. And I still have a gear or two lower that I can go to if, God forbid, I have to—a tremendous boon psychologically, Charles be damned. (Later, Jim will remark, in his laconic way, that it's good that I still have 'somewhere to go' with

my gearing. 'Cause, you know, in Hawaii you'll have all that camping gear weighing down your bike.)

As I crest the hill, I recall the advice of another guru—the guy on my training videos, specifically what he has to say about hill-climbing technique, and more specifically what he says about coming over the crest. Some riders, he claims, ease up at the end (imagine that!) but this is a big mistake—instead, that's the time to push hard and gain a huge roaring advantage down the other side. Ha ha ha, I think.

I'm here to tell you nothing is sweeter than sensing the earth flatten beneath your wheels and feel everything come easier. I like to stay in the same low gear longer than I might, and make those lovely moments last. My cadence picks up; my heart and lungs get a chance to yawn, stretch, eyeball the couch. I'm not in any hurry, I tell Video Training Guy. I wasn't in a rush getting up here, why would I hurry now?

In the car heading home, Jim's driving, I'm melting pleasantly in the passenger seat, in the warm and not-yet-clammy afterglow of exercise. It's a two-hour descent, down the Blue Ridge, across the piedmont, back to our house on the coastal plain, quite the excursion for just three hours or so of cycling especially considering we're doing it pretty much every week. In the car Jim speaks again about finding one's rhythm, a phrase familiar to me from summer hours spent watching the Tour de France on television, but when legendary Tour commentator Phil Liggett says it in his folksy working class English accent—*he's cracked, I'm afraid, and 'e'll 'ave to find 'is own rhythm now, won't 'e, and ride 'is way back in*—he's talking about a whole different class of bike rider and a whole different problem really and he's definitely not talking about me. And why is it that all these cycling gurus are men?

What Jim is saying, though, *is* about me, about my rhythm, telling me to find it, telling me it's all that matters, telling me it will get easier. His voice is gentle. His words are calm, matter-of-fact, but there's the tiniest bit of wonder in them, the same wonder I'm feeling about the day's discoveries. This small triumph of mine is inconsequential, really, against the backdrop of the big wide complicated world, but it's mine, it's physical, I worked for it. When it came to me, though, it felt pure as a gift. Out the window of the car, the afternoon sunlight is like molten gold on the blazing red and copper of the October mountains; I'm squinting as we sail over the passes. Jim says those words that end with *the only thing that matters is that everybody can get up the hill*. I don't need a guru, I just need Jim. He is smiling. We hold hands. The sky that touches those long, fiery-colored ridges is a perfect, contrasting, robin's egg blue, and I know the sky in Hawaii will be just the same.

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The next thing I discovered was the sticky-tangy thick-sweet cling-to-the-back-of-your-throat joyful mouthfeel of electrolyte-enriched energy drinks. These are your Gatorade, Powerade, et cetera, although after playing the field like a college freshman turned loose in the dorms, hooking up with every exotic flavor and sexy label I stumbled into, I settled down with Clif SHOT® electrolyte replacement drink, lemonade flavor. This because it's made of organic ingredients and uses rice syrup and cane juice for its sugar rush rather than high fructose corn syrup, and because it's a powder you mix with water and hence suitable for carrying on a touring bike.

Prior to this, I was a straight-ahead hard-core water girl. As a former nurse, I knew that our kidneys are perfectly capable of hanging onto whatever sodium and potassium we need in all but fairly extreme situations, and so I had long dismissed the electrolyte magic tricks of Gatorade and its kind. What I had refused to see—oh how smug I am!—was that the electrolytes weren't the half of it. (Could be wrong there, too, though, based on how single-mindedly I have been known to crave the inhalation of potato chips after strenuous exercise.) Sugar, I finally saw, is the power in power drinks.

This discovery did more for my quality of life vis-à-vis the actual bike riding experience than perhaps any other single innovation. It's hard to describe, but without really being aware of it, I had bicycled always with a kind of internal clock reminding me I was at risk of winding down. My rides had a downward sloping feeling toward the end, which I thought of as "fatigue," certainly not dehydration-related because my water protected me from that but simply, I thought, a natural running out of power that I semi-consciously guarded against during the later miles. I'd sort of try to pace myself in a half-assed way, and somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind I'd estimate how much reserve I had left and size up some theoretical endpoint that I needed to avoid by dismounting from the bicycle before I reached it. And of course all this was caught up in my mind with the challenged condition of my physical conditioning, and all its associated anxiety and self-doubt, so imagine my surprise when I started sucking on power juice instead of water and the downward slope disappeared. I mean evaporated, gone, as if it never was.

This, too, however, was caught up with the condition of my conditioning, which was improving by that point, well into November by then, so that I couldn't be sure: is it my budding physical prowess that accounts for the steady-state hum that carries me from start to finish on my ride, or is it the slightly salt-tinged but empty calories of this amazing candy-colored gunk?

It was, natch, the gunk and not the prowess, although the prowess is not to be discounted, it's just that it's a separate topic. And I should be clear that I did still feel *tired* as my ride wore on, tired as in weary, as in *gee I'd like to stop doing this fairly soon if possible 'cause I'm tired of it and I'm getting tired period*. But not the kind of feeling I'd had previously, of that clock ticking that was in fact, just like in the movies, a time bomb, counting down in my case to a catastrophic implosion rather than an explosion, tick-tock tick-tock *bonk*.

I used to feel—used to know—that I couldn't keep riding indefinitely and could only hope nobody would try to make me. It now feels, pretty much, that it's entirely optional how long I want to ride. What a revelation! I know it's not actually the case that I could ride through the day and the night stopping only when I finally nodded off like some driver asleep at the wheel, but my new physiology almost fools me into thinking this. It's a physiology of sugar: a steady trickle of it in my bloodstream, nudged into my cells by tiny squirts of insulin, which makes the brain cells feel contented and the muscle cells fire strong and quick over and over again, and lo it is all good. The electrolytes—the sodium and potassium—can't hurt either. Sports drink manufacturers downplay the sugar angle and hype the macho appeal of that great symbol of sweat, the mighty electrolyte. But those Tour de France guys, while they certainly do their share of imbibing electrolytes as they ride, are all about sucking down calories any way they can get them, and among their favorite delivery devices are cans of Coke, which offer a little bonus kick of caffeine, the only stimulant that's legal for pro racing cyclists. Those guys, and all of us, walk around with a pound of glycogen in our livers—our magical glucose storage system—and we start burning it if we don't have another ready source; when the glycogen's exhausted, well, that's where those Tour de France riders don't want to go. Sugar is the god they pray to, to make them bonk-proof.

So I started riding better and better, just as Jim predicted. Equal parts power juice and power practice. Another ride or two in those mountains near Frederick and I was spontaneously doing that technique Jim had suggested, which had been so beyond me at first—go with a bit bigger gear, and pedal slower. My quads felt like Zeus had spiked them with his thunderbolts. My hamstrings felt downright springy. I could do it. The legs just turned and turned. I'd look up at the top of the hill, such a long way off, and I would feel, of all things, bored. We had a dinner party and as I filled everyone's glasses, I told them I'd crushed the grapes for the wine with my thighs.

It's all relative of course, and every time we went out riding there were the Lance Armstrong types, dancing up the hill as if to some big haystack of lottery winnings waiting at the top. Not to mention Jim, who was on my wheel hardly breathing, hardly breaking a sweat. No matter. We kept riding. One day I noticed the leaves had left the trees and the mountains had taken on that smoky brown mauve soft haunted color. We got lucky with a series of beautiful Sundays. Other days of the week, the weather changed around us, and we rode in big gloves and long pants. I biked-in-place more, with TV or music or that crazy coach on the training videos. I wore skimpy camisole tops under my sweaters because I refused to concede the coming of winter. When the weather let me, I continued my study of the objects on the shoulder of the road: necks of busted bottles; crushed aluminum cans; banana peels; the odd ketchup pouch or squashed butter pat; soft drink lids with the straw still stuck through the hole; the cellophane strings of cigarette packs; the cigarette butts themselves with their unique look in decay—pale, fraying, flattening; buckets for transporting fried chicken; empty Mountain Dew bottles (talk about sicklier than Gatorade); the screw-tops off those bottles and their friends the Cokes and the Pepsis, sometimes with a tiny scribed clue or message or prize inside the lid—maybe redeeming

another free soda as a reward for drinking that one... Roadkill, of course, in all shapes and states. Lots of twigs and stones. You'd be surprised how many side view mirrors fall off cars.

Yup, I was feeling pretty plum-pleased with myself. Little Miss I-Can-Do-It-Too. Settling onto that saddle like I was sliding behind the wheel of a big old Coupe de Ville, gonna cruise into the sunset, gonna steer with my knees. Tipping back that bottle and feeling that stuff slink down my gullet like sweet liquid gold.

Little Miss I-Know-What-I'm-Doing. A-Volcano-Is-Just-a-Friend-I-Haven't-Met-Yet. Got the topographic maps, and the rain covers for my shoes, and the wilderness water filter, and the silk sleeping bag liner, and the titanium double-walled coffee mug.

And then we went to Hawaii.

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