

Learning to Ride the Bicycle of Life

A book by Joe Tye

America's Values Coach™



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1. Know when to ditch the training wheels

Training wheels are a great thing when you're learning how to ride a big-kid's bike. But at some point, they need to come off. You'd look pretty ridiculous riding down the road on your new Cannondale bicycle with training wheels. That's a pretty good metaphor for life. We all need to have a comfort zone, but we also need to continuously grow out of that comfort zone. The lessons included in this book can help you do just that, if you apply them. If you want to grow as a person – to grow personally, professionally, and spiritually – you must get out of your comfort zone. The bicycle is a perfect vehicle, and a perfect metaphor, for escaping the comforting dullness of life in the living room and re-sparking the spirit of adventure in your life. So hop on and start pedaling!

2. Don't hit the brakes when you hit the gravel



If you're speeding along down the road on your bike and unexpectedly hit a patch of loose gravel, the temptation is to immediately hit the brakes. But if you do, more likely than not you will just as quickly hit the ground. A much safer approach is to coast, to ride it out as you gradually slow down, keep your concentration and maintain your balance, and not even think about falling.

We're faced with similar challenges in our everyday lives. At the first sign quarterly profits might not hit the expectations of analysts and shareholders, the CEO might be tempted to slam on the brakes by slashing "discretionary" expenditures like advertising or staff training. Although it might take longer for the effects to be felt than would a tumble from a bike, the damage can be very real, and it can take a long time to heal.

At an organization where I once worked, I was holding a staff meeting in a department characterized by low morale, marginal productivity, and lousy

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attitudes. When I asked about this, a participant remarked, “It all started when ‘the suits’ decided to save money by canceling the employee picnic. It was the one nice thing they used to do for us.” I’d been at the organization for a number of years, but I’d never heard about an employee picnic. “Picnic? How long ago was this?” I asked.

The response: “Oh, I don’t know – five or six years ago.” We on the management team were furiously pedaling away, wondering why our “knees” hurt so much, oblivious to the wounds that had been inflicted five or six years earlier when a previous rider hit the brakes on the proverbial patch of gravel.

The effects can be similarly traumatic at home. A teenager comes home way past curfew. Instead of riding it out until morning, when the situation can be handled with love, compassion, and understanding, the parent slams on the brakes: “You’re grounded! Give me the car keys and go to bed.” Though it might not be superficially obvious in the morning, a wound has been inflicted that will require first aid if it is to heal properly. The danger is, like the long-forgotten (by management), long-remembered (by staff), cancelled employee picnic, what might have been a minor abrasion can turn into an ugly scar.

If you mentally rehearse your reaction to hitting a patch of gravel before it actually happens, you’re less likely to panic when it does. So, too, in business and in life. If you anticipate the possibility of an economic downturn, or a rebellious teenager, and mentally rehearse your response, you’re more likely to respond with intelligence rather than react in anger.

3. The faster you ride, the stronger the headwind



If you hop on your bike on a perfectly still day and start down the road at ten miles per hour, the wind in your face will feel the same as it would standing still in a ten mile per hour breeze. Crank it up to fifteen mph and it will *feel*

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like the wind has more than doubled its velocity. It's the same in life. The faster you're moving, the stiffer the resistance you're likely to encounter.

It's important to know this for two reasons. First, increasing resistance can be an early warning signal that you're perhaps moving too fast. The overly aggressive salesperson who can't figure out why he doesn't close as many deals as his more laid-back counterpart might become more productive by paying better attention to the wind he's riding into.

When I was a young hospital administrator, I seemed to have run into more than my share of relationship problems. The problem was almost never that I was doing the wrong thing. Rather, it was that I was doing the right thing, but doing it too fast, before having taken the time to inform effected parties and build consensus behind the decision or action. Had I taken the time to better understand the resistance, I would have slowed down and built a more solid foundation before plowing ahead into the wind.

The second reason it's important to understand this phenomenon, however, is that a stiff headwind could well be an indicator of huge opportunity if you keep on pedaling into it. When Herb Kelleher and Rollin King sketched out the plan for Southwest Airlines on the back of a cocktail napkin in 1966, they had no idea of the hurricane of resistance they would stir up. Their intended competitors held them up with court delays for six years before they were able to get their first plane in the air. Bill McGowan and his team at MCI had to ride into a similar headwind in their fight to pry a share of the telecommunications market away from the (then) AT&T monopoly. By pedaling into the wind, leaders of MCI and Southwest Airlines changed the world.

Sometimes the headwind is more benign, but no less hindering. Almost every entrepreneur can tell you of well-meaning friends and family members who encouraged a go-slow (or no-go) approach, when what was warranted was a flat-out sprint to, in the words of the Confederate cavalry officer Nathan Bedford Forrest, "get there firstest with the mostest."

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The most pernicious headwinds are the ones we create for ourselves. Fear of success, ambivalence about money, and low self-esteem can all lead to self-sabotaging behavior when it feels like things are going too well, like we're moving too fast. To give in to this headwind will not make you more secure. In this dynamic and turbulent world, trying to avoid risk – slowing down when resistance increases – can actually make you less secure. There are times when we must, to quote the memorable title of Susan Jeffers' book – “feel the fear and do it anyway.”

How do you know when a headwind is an indication that it's time to slow down and build consensus, and when it's a signal that you must really be onto something super to have provoked such a reaction, so “damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead?” There's no easy answer. But here's a clue I always look for: if the cause of the resistance has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo – whether it's an outside competitor trying to keep you out of its market or inner resistance trying to keep you from quitting a boring job to start a business doing work you love – then it's time to shift into a higher gear, put your head down, and fly.

On the other hand, if the one causing the resistance could really benefit from the change you're trying to bring about, and would likely become a tailwind if properly informed of the rationale, pulling off to the side of the road to communicate more clearly about where you are going, and why you're in such a hurry to get there, might result in your ultimately going farther, faster, than trying to bulldoze your way headlong through the tempest.

4. Change gears before you have to



The most efficient way to use your energy going uphill on a bike is to maintain a steady cadence for as long as possible. You do this by downshifting *before* the hill's resistance has caused your pedal RPM rate to slow down. You shift

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gears *in anticipation* of the resistance, not in reaction to it. A great deal of emotional suffering and financial discomfort could be prevented if people would apply the same principle in their careers. The time to start networking is at the first hint of business difficulties that could eventually lead to layoffs, not the day after you get your pink slip. The time to turn off the TV and start taking night classes is when you feel the first rumblings of boredom and frustration at your job, not when your attitude has gotten so bad that you made Dilbert look like a poster child for the Chamber of Commerce.

Whenever I see someone with a bumper sticker that says, “The worst day fishing is better than the best day working,” I want to ask them why they don’t get a job fishing. Life is just too short (or too long, looked at another way) to waste your time doing work that you can’t do with enthusiasm, with passion, and with love – just to pay for your fishing tackle. In his book *The Prophet*, the poet Kahlil Gibran wrote that “work is love made visible.” If you can’t do your work with love, he said, you’re better off going down to the city gates to beg for alms.

Here’s a question that could change your life: What would you do if every job paid the same and had the same social status? If that work is different than what you are doing now, how can you build a bridge from where you are to where you dream of being? For example, if you dream of being a writer, can you give yourself a quota of submitting a letter to the editor at least once a week. If you want to have your own business, can you start now by joining a network marketing company? You’ll learn a lot about sales and motivation, and about running a home-based business, not to mention learning a lot about yourself.

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5. When the going is easy, ride hard; when the going is hard, ride easy



As I write this, I'm sitting on a bed in a cabin at Grand Canyon Village. On this trip, I only have two days to spend at this, my favorite place on earth.

Yesterday I hiked from the South Rim to the Colorado River and back – a sixteen mile round trip, one-half of which felt like it was straight down, and the other half of which felt like it was straight up. Needless to say, today I'm sore. Very sore. It's been snowing all day, so except for a short hike along the West Rim Trail, I've been cabin-bound, working on my business plan for next year. But now, after working all afternoon, my mind has joined my body on the casualty list.

As it got harder and harder to fight my way through fatigue (and laziness) and keep working, something popped into my head that I once heard a veteran bicyclist say: "When the going is easy, ride hard; when the going is hard, ride easy." In other words, when the wind is at your back, make tracks! When it's in your face, enjoy the scenery. It's great advice – and it's ancient advice: make hay while the sun shines.

So, rather than trying to tough it out and keep working, I've shifted gears. I'm riding easy – writing in my journal, dreaming big dreams, thinking of my family back at home, and writing this. I'll get up a little earlier tomorrow morning and, refreshed and rested, and will probably complete my project in half the time it would take me tonight. Of course, I just might find that thinking and dreaming and writing has been so revitalizing that I can hop back on today, and ride (write) even harder.

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6. Never lose momentum unnecessarily

In the last section, I discussed the principle “ride hard when the going is easy, ride easy when the going is hard.” That has everything to do with building and maintaining momentum. When you’re riding between hills, you want to build up a good head of steam going down the hills so you don’t have to knock yourself out when you’re going back up (you *have* checked your bike for safety and you *are* wearing a helmet, right?).

When things are going really well at work and you’re making a great paycheck, that’s the time to put money into savings and investments so you’ve got momentum behind you if the going gets hard. Take the time to nurture great relationships at home and at work so you’ve got lots of good will (a.k.a. momentum) built up when relationships hit the inevitable bumps in the road. After you’ve closed that big sale – the one you’ve been working on all year – don’t go celebrate just yet. Pick up the phone and make another call, right now while you’ve got this incredible surge of momentum behind you.

Have you ever been struggling with anxiety and depression, perhaps finding it difficult to even climb out of bed in the morning? It feels a lot like that point halfway up a steep hill where the force of gravity is somehow violating the laws of physics and becoming stronger the higher up the hill you go, doesn’t it?

Quick! Go for a run, call a friend, read an inspiring book, go see a counselor – do something, do anything, to regain your momentum as rapidly as possible, because the closer you come to a dead stop, the harder it will be for you to get moving again.

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7. Keep pedaling past the top of the hill

You've just crested a particularly challenging hill, and now you're about to cruise down the other side. It's so tempting to just coast, to let gravity do the work for you. Don't do it! As you were straining your legs to pump your way up the hill, lactic acid was building up in your muscles. If you stop pedaling and coast now, that's exactly where all that lactic acid will stay – in your leg muscles – where it will later cause soreness and possibly cramping.

I've read lots of books written successful coaches at the collegiate and professional levels in a variety of different sports. Whatever the sport, and whatever angle taken by the coach in writing the book, they all make one point emphatically clear – the moment of a team's greatest danger comes just after having won it all. That's when arrogance and complacency set in.

When I taught entrepreneurship classes, I would encourage my students to dream a big, magnificent dream, to transform it into a memory of the future, and then to work hard and expect a miracle. It is, I believe, a surefire formula for success. But as they'd get closer to the realization of that dream, I add a caveat: you have to dream beyond that initial dream. What's the next great big goal that's going to inspire you, challenge you, and prevent you from becoming arrogant and complacent? In short, that's going to keep you pedaling forward to success and not coasting down the hill toward failure.



8. Drink before you're thirsty

Riding a bike is dehydrating exercise, especially if you're pushing really hard or if it's really hot – or both. Sometimes you don't recognize that you're getting dehydrated because the wind evaporates your sweat as fast as it can pour out. Then, you're suddenly dying of thirst and frantically reaching for your water

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bottle. The secret of preventing dehydration is to drink water before you're thirsty. Experts say that by the time you recognize your thirst, it's too late – you're already dehydrated. You can, of course, re-hydrate by drinking (water, not beer), but you will have paid a price in energy loss that could have been prevented by drinking before you felt thirsty.

It's the same in many other areas of life. I would tell students in my entrepreneurship class that the most expensive capital in the world is the capital you need to keep from going out of business. The time to seek a loan or venture capital, or to issue a public stock offering, is long before you think you need the money, not when creditors are banging on the door.

It's not just that money acquired in desperation is more expensive, though that's usually the case. (You pay a higher interest rate for debt and you give up more of your company for equity capital when you have to take whatever's offered or shut down.) It's also that desperation is a severely uncomfortable emotional state. Desperate people make notoriously bad decisions. It's also physically and spiritually draining, to be agonizing over how you're going to keep the wolves at bay while you restructure your affairs.

The time to ask the bank for a bigger credit line is when you're gainfully employed, not after you've lost a job. The time to bring new investors into your business is after you've just closed a big sale, not after you've just lost a big customer. The time to seek new friends and contacts is when you're in a position to help them, not when you're in need of help yourself. The time to drink is before you're thirsty.



9. Share the road

In one of his books, Norman Vincent Peale shares a story of how, during the Great Depression, he had to come home and tell his wife that his already

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meager minister's salary had been slashed as the church tried to rein in its expenses. "I don't know how we're going to get by on half the pay," he told her.

"I do," she replied. "We're going to start tithing." Now, you can just imagine the scene, can't you? Norman saying: "No dear, you don't understand. I got a pay *cut*, not a pay raise." And Ruth replying, "Yes, dear, I heard you. And it says right here in the Good Book that we should give away ten percent of whatever we are blessed with."

Peale later said that their decision to begin tithing was a turning point, and that all future prosperity and abundance sprang from that initial impulse of generosity. Many another successful person tells a similar story – their life began to turn around the day they gave something they thought they couldn't afford to lose to someone who needed it even more than they did.

Many bicyclists have "Share the Road" bumper stickers on their cars. By that, we mean that we want other people – specifically people in motor vehicles – to tithe: to give us ten percent of the road. What if we each had "Share the Road" tattooed in our hearts? How much better would the world be if we gave away ten percent of the things we didn't think we could live without?

How much more understanding would there be if we each gave ten percent of our listening to people whose views we disagree with? How many more worthwhile projects would be completed if we each devoted ten percent of our time to work for which we didn't get paid? How much more happiness would there be if we each gave away ten percent of our emotional energy in the form of love and kindness? And yes, how much less poverty would there be if we each gave away ten percent of our money? Share the road. It's a great philosophy for life.



10. You'll worry a lot less about a safety net if you'll acknowledge how close to the ground your rope really is

Every time I see a lone cross-country bicyclist go by, I feel a pang of envy. They look so free, so independent, so self-contained. Off to see America in a way that their car-bound fellow citizens never experience it. I've spoken with many people about the spirit of enterprise that drives people like this – the adventurer, the explorer, the entrepreneur. Almost everyone has the same reaction I do: admiration, blended with a big dollop of envy.

That being the case, why do so few of us “just do it” – just go out and follow that road to wherever it might lead us? I was recently speaking with a friend who had lost a job. Truth be told, it was the best thing that could have happened to him. He didn't like his work all that well, and certainly would not have chosen that career but for the big paychecks. Now he was free to try something new. Free, and scared to death. I asked him why he didn't just break away, follow his heart down the road to see where it would lead him.

“I need a bigger safety net,” he replied. As if having just a little (or a lot) more money in the bank (that's the way he defined his safety net – more money) would somehow make the fear go away. I pointed out that he'd worry a lot less about his safety net if he would appreciate how close to the ground his trapeze really was. He couldn't really get hurt too badly if he were to fall. Oh, sure, he might have had to move into a smaller house for a while, or experience the humiliation of going to Uncle Ben for a loan. But there are no more debtors' prisons in America. And chances are the closest he'd ever come to real starvation is having the pizza delivery guy show up late.

In the world that we are blessed to live in, even if you do fall, you won't fall far, and someone will likely be there to help you back up if you do. So what is it that's holding *you* back from that cross country bike trip, or whatever else it is that you have a secret longing to do? Just do it! The worst thing that can happen just isn't that bad.

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11. Trust in people, but lock your bike



Tom Snyders, The Bicycling Comedian, was the banquet speaker at one of our *Never Fear, Never Quit* conferences. As he usually does, he brought his bike, all loaded down with packs and bags, right into the room. It was a beautiful red Cannondale. At the end of his show, Tom took questions. Someone asked him if, in his eleven years of riding a bike all across the country, his bike had ever been stolen. No, he said, he'd never had a bike stolen. He went on to talk about how his experience had given him great faith in the basic goodness of most people.

Then he smiled and, with the impeccable timing of a professional comedian, continued, "Of course, not once in the past eleven years have I let my bike out of my sight."

I was once listening to a tape by Jack Canfield (co-creator of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series) on the subject of raising self esteem. He mentioned W. Clement Stone, the insurance magnate who co-authored a book on positive mental attitude with Napoleon Hill. Stone, said Canfield, was a "reverse paranoid." He thought everyone in the world was trying to help him!

No doubt, Stone's insurance company took all the appropriate precautions to prevent theft and embezzlement. There's no sense in leaving valuables lying around unguarded, knowing that even good people slip on occasion. But having the controls in place allowed Stone the freedom to assume the best, and expect the best, from everyone he dealt with. I'm certain that Stone's outlook was a big part of the success he enjoyed. He got the best because he expected it. And as we'll see in the next section, you very often do get what you look for.

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12. You find what you look for

One beautiful sunny day on RAGBRAI (the Des Moines Register's Annual Bicycle Ride Across Iowa), I was riding in a crowd of people (you're always riding in a crowd of people on RAGBRAI) as we passed through a small picturesque Iowa town. We crossed over a bridge that spanned a river so beautiful the scene literally stopped me dead in my tracks. I pulled off to the side and just sat there for a while, watching the river flow past. The scene could have been a painting by Norman Rockwell – two little boys with their jeans rolled up to their knees and fishing poles in their hands hop-scotching their way across the rocks to their favorite spot. An old man in a chair on the bank watching them, now content to just sit and fish for memories. And on the beach, a throng of teenagers piling their stuff into canoes.

Then a young woman pulled up next to me, looked over the parapet to the crowd on the beach below, and hollered out to her riding companions, “Hey, dudes, check it out! A party. Maybe they've got some beer.”

That woman and I went looking for two very different Americas. We both found what we were looking for – in the very same place.

13. The steepest hills are in your mind



Indian Gardens is a beautiful piece of heaven that straddles Bright Angel Trail as it snakes its way from the south rim of the Grand Canyon to the Colorado River nearly eight miles and 5,000 feet below. Coming up from the river carrying a heavy pack, by the time you reach Indian Gardens you're tired, probably very tired. You stand in the shade of a cottonwood tree for a bit, fill up your water bottle, and then look ahead at the sheer vertical cliff that stands between you and your destination at the top.

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“Impossible,” you think, your eyes disbelieving what your mind knows to be true, that there is a trail which will take you up that vertical wall to the village. Looking back down on Indian Gardens from the top, you’re likely to smile the tired smile of hard-earned accomplishment, and tell yourself it really wasn’t that difficult after all. The toughest challenge was mental.

The same holds true for riding a bike, taking difficult classes in school, starting a business, or most of life’s other challenges. The hills always seem a lot steeper from the bottom than they do from the top. When you’re at the bottom, if you convince yourself that the hill is too steep to climb, you can be sure it will be. You’ll end up walking the bike, or turning around and going back. On the other hand, it’s amazing how often you can start what seems to be an impossible trek, only to find that a previously hidden path unfolds before you your feet as you climb.

In his book *Some Miracles Take Time*, the late Art Berg told the story of how he finished a world record ultra marathon through the deserts of Utah – in a wheelchair. At the end of each blistering day, he thought it couldn’t possibly get any hotter: the next day it got hotter. As he pushed himself up each impossibly steep mountain road, he thought it couldn’t possibly get any steeper: it got steeper. As he felt the agony of torn muscles, bleeding hands, and an exhausted body, he thought it couldn’t possibly get any more painful: it got more painful. But Art didn’t quit. He kept pushing through the heat, through the hills, and through the pain. The fact is that Art finished the race in his mind long before his wheelchair crossed the finish line. Once he’d conquered the mountains in his mind, it was all but inevitable that his body would finish the job.

14. Leave people better than you found them



Tim Lane is the Fitness Consultant for the Iowa State Department of Health, but he’s more widely known as one of Iowa’s greatest proponents for safe and

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responsible bicycling. He is the creator of the Ride Right program. Each year, Tim rides with Team Skunk on RAGBRAI, and gives the same speech to his crew the evening before the ride starts. He reminds us of how, if we were camping with the Scouts or some other youth group, our instructors would tell us to leave the campsite cleaner than we found it.

That's good advice for RAGBRAI, he points out, and adds that we should go one step further, making it a point to leave *the people* we meet just a little better for the encounter. We might do this by sharing a smile or a word of encouragement, or by listening with an open heart to someone who is hurting and needs a friend.

If you make this a practice in your everyday life, you just never know when, through some small kindness, you'll change someone's life. Not long ago, someone told me how a simple kindness from a stranger pulled him back from the brink of suicide. He had no way to repay that stranger, and the stranger will never know the vast magnitude of the service he performed.

I've spent many an evening with support groups – for people with cancer, head injuries, addictions, and other personal losses. Something I note is that almost everyone leaves somehow better off than they arrived. They go home with ideas and inspiration, and perhaps with new friends, that make the adversity a bit more manageable, and perhaps a bit more meaningful. I often wonder why the workplace can't be like that. Why can't we look out for each other during the course of our work days – making sure that we each do our part to help someone who's had a tough day will go home somehow better for the experience.

15. Don't judge a rider by the size of his legs



Go to any organized bicycle ride and you'll see all the young bucks strutting around on legs that look like they've been carved out of old oak trees. These latter day Hercules can fly up a hill faster than I can go down it. Actually,

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though, I'm much more impressed by people whose legs are so atrophied they can't even walk on them, much less pedal a bike. Every year, a group of wheelchair-bound riders comes on RAGBRAI riding hand-cycles in which the pedals are powered by arm muscle. Mile after mile after mile, these paraplegic riders power their way up hills, into the wind, across the state of Iowa by using their arms.

It is exhausting just to watch, and gives a whole new meaning to the term "arm chair." One year, I rode for a while with one of these riders. It was the first day out, and he was in great pain. He struggled up the hills so slowly that on occasion I had to stop and walk my bike alongside him. When I asked if he thought he could finish the entire 499 mile ride, he simply said, "one day at a time."

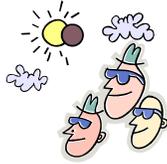
Seven days later, I saw him again. He was much darker from exposure to the sun, and seemed to have lost a little weight. But it was the look on his face that bore the greatest transformation. No Olympic champion could have been prouder. The next day, this hand-cycle champion of RAGBRAI would be back in his wheelchair. People would look at him, and then look away, wondering what misfortune had befallen him, and perhaps pray to be protected from the same thing happening to them. Unfortunately, they would not be able to see the size of the heart that had powered him across the length of Iowa.

How often we do that. Dismiss the maid or the janitor simply because of their lowly station on the totem pole of the working world, and never appreciate that in some other aspect of life, this might be a genuine American hero: someone who could teach us about being a terrific parent, who could teach us about charity and mercy and the power of faith. The next time you're tempted to look down on someone else, or worse yet to look right through them as if they weren't even there, remember the arm chair rider. Gold is buried in ordinary dirt, and heroes are often hidden in the most unlikely bodies.

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16. Enjoy the weather

Sometimes you'll be out on your bike on a scorching hot day, and find yourself thinking of how nice it would feel to ride into a rain shower, or to encounter a cooling headwind. Other times you're suffering through a cold, miserable rain or riding into a gale force headwind and dreaming of a nice ride through the dry heat of Death Valley. The fact is that you can't change the weather, no matter what it is or where you are, so you might as well enjoy it. When you're struggling through the heat, remember the times that you prayed for it. When you're freezing in the cold, remind yourself the day will soon come that you'll be wishing you were cold again.

Shakespeare said that nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so. Is the weather beautiful or atrocious? Yes. It's what you choose it to be. When you're riding through the desert spots of your life, carry a little bit of snowstorm in your heart; when you're in the frigid wastelands, warm them up with remembrances of the scorching sun.

Ivan Misner, founder of Business Networking International (BNI), likes to say that the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence; the grass is greener where you water it. In the same way, the weather is not beautiful somewhere else; the weather is beautiful where you appreciate it.

17. Don't complain about the terrain



One time I was on an organized bike ride, and there was an optional century loop that I swear was designed by M.C. Escher – you know, the artist who drew those magnificent optical illusions. Like a staircase that goes only up, but not down? That's what this course was like. It was a huge square, but each of the four legs was uphill! And into the wind! You started and ended in the same

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place, without ever having gone downhill or having had a tailwind. I know, that's impossible, but as Dave Barry would say, I swear I'm not making this up (well, maybe just a bit of it.)

I had a choice. I could complain about the terrain, even though I could not change it. Or I could keep on pedaling, and get a good laugh out of the optical illusion that I seemed to have gotten myself into. That's so often how things are at work, isn't it?

I'll never forget the time I was interviewing nurses in a busy hospital intensive care unit. This one veteran was complaining about everything – budget cuts, Medicare reductions, too much work for too little money, patients who complained too much (now that was interesting – the complainer complaining about people who complained too much). On and on she went.

I finally asked her who could fix those problems. Was it within her power to do anything about any of them? She laughed. Could the CEO of her hospital do anything about them? More derisive laughter. Could Congress fix the problems? A snort of contempt. Who could possibly solve the problems that were causing her such misery? The answer was: nobody. She could complain until she was blue in the face, but the problems were beyond being fixed, at least in the short term. They were part of the terrain she had chosen to ride across when she decided to become a nurse.

18. Set your face with determination



In his historical novel *Gates of Fire*, about the battle of Thermopylae, Steven Pressfield describes how Spartan warriors trained their faces to subdue fear and to convey courage and determination to the rest of their bodies.

Experienced bicyclists do the same thing. Coming into a steep hill, or racing to

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overtake a competitor, they will set their faces with an expression of determination, conveying to the rest of their body the will to prevail.

The most powerful precept in the entire self-help literature is the “AS IF” principle. Two thousand years ago, Jesus said that when you pray, you should pray AS IF your prayers had already been answered. More recently, Winston Churchill said that we should act AS IF it were impossible to fail. When you look in the mirror, see a face that is optimistic, cheerful, and determined – AS IF it belonged to a person who was already sitting on top of the world.

You’ve heard it said that life is not a dress rehearsal. Well, in at least one important respect, life *is* a dress rehearsal: the way you act today is your rehearsal for tomorrow. If you walk around with a long face that says to the rest of the world that you’re defeated and hopeless, bitter and angry, that’s what you will be tomorrow: defeated and bitter, angry and hopeless.

On the other hand, if your face conveys an expression of hope and optimism, if it is set with determination to prevail despite the odds that might be arrayed against you, you can be certain you will succeed – though you might need a fair bit of rehearsing before you’re ready for prime time.

I recently stopped for dinner at my favorite restaurant in New Orleans, a little café called Mother’s. I ran into a retired movie producer who told me about a conversation he once overheard in Hollywood. A young would-be actor approached the great Spencer Tracy, who was studying his lines on the set. “Mr. Tracy,” the young man asked with great deference, “what is the secret to being a great actor?”

Without even looking up from the script, Tracy simply replied, “Don’t get caught at it.” Set your face with courage and determination. You’ll fool other people into believing that you are courageous and determined. They’ll start treating you like someone who is courageous and determined. You will increasingly find yourself acting the part of someone who is courageous and

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determined. And after you have acted AS IF for a while, you will realize that you REALLY ARE courageous and determined.

19. Don't ride the brakes



Sometimes the brakes on my bike will get out of alignment, so that one of the pads rubs against the wheel. It slows me down until I make an adjustment. Fortunately, misaligned brakes are an easy problem to diagnose and repair – on a bicycle. It's much more difficult to fix the problem in life. I frequently find myself riding the brake, slowing down my own progress toward achieving my goals. I'll bet you do as well, and like me, usually don't even recognize that you're doing it. The brakes are being applied at a subconscious level, and we don't see what's happening until we've ground to a virtual stop, exhausted from fighting the internal friction.

There are all kinds of brakes we apply to slow ourselves down when we think we're moving too fast. Like guilt. We start moving rapidly toward success. Suddenly, guilt clamps down on the wheel. Who do you think you are, to be such a success? Why are you spending so much time chasing success when you should be playing with your children (or doing your taxes or mowing the lawn or whatever else is not being done at the moment)? If you become a success, think of all the people you'll leave behind. Guilt can be a potent brake.

Fear is another powerful brake. Fear of failure, fear of rejection, and fear of commitment can stop you dead in your tracks before you ever build your momentum. Too many times people try to plow their way through, without stopping to understand the nature of the inner resistance and to deal with it. That's like trying to ride a bike with misaligned brakes by pedaling harder rather than first fixing the brakes. It's exhausting and counterproductive.

The first step to fixing the brakes is to ask questions that diagnose the problem. Why are you afraid of failure? What's the worst that can happen if

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you fail? Who will think less of you if you do fail? What can you do to pick yourself back up if you should fall down? What does it mean to be rejected: is someone rejecting *you* or simply an idea, product, or service that they don't happen to need at the moment? Why are you afraid of committing yourself to the hard work and sacrifice that's likely to be required for you to achieve any worthwhile goal? And if you're not committed to success, then what are you committed to? Failure?

The next time you find yourself emotionally exhausted, and feel like you're pedaling with the brakes on, pull off to the side of the road. Check the brakes. They may be rubbing against your wheels, slowing you down.

20. Stop and spend time in the cemeteries you pass by



One of my favorite things when I'm riding my bike through the countryside is to stop in the small town cemeteries for a few moments of stillness and reflection. Not long ago, I stopped by a small town near where I live and wandered through the cemetery. At one end I saw a huge boulder that had some sort of display built around it. Walking up to it, I read that the boulder had been transported there from the Gettysburg battlefield by a group of local women in the year 1916. It was accompanied by a prayer for peace in their time. You just know what was on their minds if you're a history buff: the hope that none of their boys would be called off to the great world war that was convulsing Europe at that time.

In 1916 the world was a simpler place than it is today, and we like to think that it was perhaps a time of innocence. But the modern world was already impinging, even on this small Iowa farm town. Not far away are gravestones of young men who died in France, in 1918. Iowa's contribution to the war to end all wars, the war that was to make the world safe for democracy.

It is well that we should occasionally stop and regain a sense of perspective. For anyone fortunate enough to living in America today, that

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exercise should provoke a sense of gratitude. One time I rode my bike into a campground that was a veritable tent city. But the people living in this tent city would only be there for the night. They would be amply fed by the local residents, who had been cooking all day long in every church and school kitchen in that community to prepare for the onslaught of hungry bike riders.

My thoughts went back to the year 1931 and another tent city, this one in our nation's capitol. This tent city was filled with hungry men, many of them veterans of the Great War that had claimed the lives of the boys resting near that rock from Gettysburg. This tent city was called Hooverville after the president who was in office when the Great Depression struck, and whose 1932 campaign promise was "a chicken in every pot."

That evening I had to laugh at the people who complained about the showers being too cold, about the food having run out too soon, about their aching backs and aching knees, about the prospect of one more sweltering night in a tent far from their air-conditioned homes. And I had to remind myself to not add my voice to the chorus of complaints.



21. Don't complain: you chose to be here

Join a group of cyclists taking a break in the middle of a long ride, and you probably won't have to wait very long before the complaining starts. "Jeez, my knees are killing me!" "Man, that wind was relentless – like trying to ride through a wind tunnel!" "That was nothing – you should have been with us in the Rockies." And on and on.

I'm always tempted to ask the complainers whether someone is forcing them to be part of this ride, or they chose to participate of their own free will, knowing there would probably be hills and wind and rain. Complaining can be insidious. It starts out as seemingly harmless small talk. You whine about something while your listener commiserates, then you switch roles for a while. But eventually, complaining fosters a sense of helplessness and victimization.

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You feel helpless to stop the wind and victimized by having to ride into it, so you complain about it. And complaining shifts responsibility for your present state of discomfort away from your own shoulders to someone else's.

An essential part of becoming a grown-up is to stop this process of dodging responsibility, and that's what complaining usually is. The complainer is saying, whether intentionally or not, that whatever it is that's being complained about is not his fault, and that there's nothing he can do about it. Of course, it's a lot easier to whine and point fingers than it is to actually be a part of the solution. The fact is that no matter where you are and no matter what obstacle stands in your way, you are where you are today because of choices you have made in the past. You will be where you will be in the future as a direct result of the choices you made from this point on.

No matter how big your problems seem, no matter how daunting the obstacle that stands in your way, the world is full of people who have overcome even bigger obstacles to achieve their goals. The first step in their road to success was to accept total, complete, and absolute responsibility for their circumstances and their outcomes, and to stop complaining about them.



22. Success is 85% stamina

Several years ago, while taking a class at The University of Iowa Writers Workshop, I heard a talk by Bill Kinsella, author of the book *Shoeless Joe* (which became the movie *Field of Dreams*). Success in writing, he said, requires four things: five percent is creativity, five percent is technique, five percent is style, and eighty-five percent is stamina. He defined stamina as sitting down to write your 50th short story after having just gotten your 49th rejection letter.

In 1987, world champion cyclist Greg LeMond was almost killed in a hunting accident. Two years later, still carrying 30 lead shotgun pellets in his body, LeMond did what many would have considered impossible even for a

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rider not so burdened. He overcame a 50-second gap between himself and the lead rider in the last stage of the Tour de France to win his second Tour championship. He won the Tour again in 1990. What carried LeMond from tragedy to victory? Stamina.

Stamina is usually thought of in the physical sense, but emotional stamina is actually more important, and often precedes physical stamina. It takes courage and determination to put your body through the work that's required to be strong enough to be a contender in an event like a bike race. It takes courage and determination to make the commitment to everyday stamina that is required to be excellent in the challenges we all face to be a good worker, a good parent, a good person.



23. Too much pain can wipe out the gain

A serious cyclist sent a letter to the help columnist of a bicycling magazine with this problem. He had initiated his training program earlier in the year than usual; he'd been training more diligently than ever before, riding the extra miles extra hard; and was lifting weights and doing calisthenics to improve his overall conditioning. Yet when he rode he felt tired and listless, and in races was actually performing at a level below that of previous years. What, he wondered, could possibly be going wrong.

The expert's diagnosis: overtraining. Yep, he was pushing himself too hard. His body was shutting down on him as a way of getting his attention. He needed more rest and less exercise if he was to compete at his highest level. Too much pain was wiping out much of the gain he'd hoped to achieve by working so hard.

You don't have to be a world-class athlete to suffer from the deleterious effects of overtraining. In fact, it happens all the time in the world of work, except that it goes by a different term: burnout. That's often what burnout is –



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your body telling you that you're pushing it too hard, that it's time to slow down and enjoy the scenery.

24. Stop making excuses and start getting in shape

In her editorial for the January-February, 1999 issue of *Bicycling* magazine, Executive Editor Lisa Gosselin wrote about world-class cyclist Lance Armstrong. A year earlier, Armstrong had endured massive surgery to have cancerous tumors removed from his testicles, stomach, and brain. At the time of Gosselin's editorial, Lance was back on his bike, training for the 2,400 mile Tour de France, one of the world's most grueling athletic competitions. Since then, of course, he's won seven of them and become a legend.

Armstrong's story, Gosselin wrote, is both inspiring and depressing. "Inspiring, because it shows that with the right training, the right mindset and the will to win, we can overcome anything. Depressing because it blows to shrapnel any excuse that most of us have for not being in shape." Her prescription: stop making the excuses and get to work.

That's pretty good advice for every area of your life. I used to conduct a seminar on *The Four Pillars of Success*, which covered strategies for managing attitudes, time, career, and money. I heard lots of excuses for why people couldn't bring themselves to have a positive attitude; for why they never seemed to have enough time; for why they were stuck in a job they deplored; and for why financial independence was for them the impossible dream.

Many of these excuses had a familiar ring to them, because I'd heard them all before, and made many of them myself in the past. When you get right down to it, most excuses fall into one or more of these three categories: Excuse #1: I can't achieve my goals because someone else (fill in the blank: parents, employer, government, customers, God) did not give me something that is essential for my success. Excuse #2: I can't achieve my goals because some insurmountable obstacle (fill in the blank: no jobs, poor economy, not

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enough time, tough competitors, not enough money) stands in my way. Excuse #3: I can't achieve my goals because I'm not good enough (fill in the blank: not capable, not properly educated, not tough enough, not smart enough) to be capable and deserving of the success.

Here are two guaranteed excuse-busters: stop wasting time watching television and stop wasting money on shopping therapy. Then ruthlessly concentrate every minute and every penny that's freed up to obtaining the resources you need, to overcoming the obstacles you face, and to preparing yourself to be capable and deserving of success in achieving the goals that really matter. You'll be amazed at how much these two simple steps can enhance your sense of personal responsibility, and the level of control you begin to exert over your own destiny.



25. Don't let the fear of dogs keep you from riding

One of my most vivid childhood memories is riding my bike down the road and being chased by a very big, very mean dog. He was barking and snarling as though I reminded him of dinner, and it was quickly becoming obvious that he could run faster than I could pedal. Although the fight-or-flight reflex kicked in with textbook precision, energizing my stubby little legs to spin the pedals for all they were worth, the dog caught me and tore the bottom out of my pants.

For the longest time, I didn't want to ride my bike again for fear of being chased, and bitten, by a dog. Even worse, from that experience I began to assume that all dogs are ruthless child-killers. With every barking dog I saw, the world seemed like an increasingly dangerous place.

We often let fear of "dogs" keep us from pursuing our dreams. Many of these dogs are really just old memories blown out of proportion, transmogrified into fear. You've probably heard this acronym for fear: Fantasized Experience Appearing Real. If I were to refrain from riding my bike because once, more

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than thirty years ago, I'd been bitten by a dog, most people would think that I was being unreasonably anxious.

Yet how many people don't take the risk of rejection because once, many years ago, they were rejected and it was painful? How many people don't take the risk of failure because once, many years ago, they failed and were chastised for it? How many people don't take the risk of commitment because once, many years ago, they made a commitment and it overwhelmed them? The dog that bit me has long since passed on to dog heaven (at least I hope he's in dog heaven; for my part, I've long since forgiven him for giving in to his natural dog instincts).

One of the chief challenges in life is to overcome the old memories that hold you back from achieving what you are capable of achieving, from becoming the person you were born to be. Maybe it's time to take some of your old memories to obedience training, to teach them to sit and heel when you decide to go out and take the risks that are essential if you are to achieve your most authentic goals and dreams, and become the person you are meant-to-be.

**Dream a Big Dream, Make It a Memory of the Future, and
Expect a Miracle! Then hop on that bicycle and ride!**