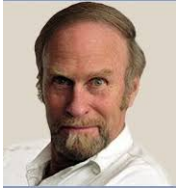


This Memorial Day: What's In An Empty Pizza Box?



By Frosty Wooldridge

During Memorial Day Weekend, let's honor our fallen and those serving on active duty. It's a rare luck of fate that each of us enjoys being an American citizen. If you have cycled or traveled across six continents and endless countries, you understand that America remains a beacon of hope and inspiration for the world.

Therefore, this column represents most people in America. It represents our highest and best as human beings. And I must share with you: we're going to come through this tempest because we love America, even with its warts and shortfalls. It's our only home. I might add, if you don't like America, just visit Africa or India or China and/or 50 other third-world countries for a heavy dose of reality. I have, and it's not pretty out there for billions across the globe.

So, please enjoy this short story of my travels on a bicycle, coast to coast, across America. It will warm your heart and give you hope, along with a big smile across your face.

This story finds us at the tail-end of our 4,100-mile coast to coast bicycle adventure across the Northern Tier of America by a bunch of 70-year old's. When I was young, I didn't think much about it during my first crossing in 1975, but now that I'm a senior citizen, every day grows more precious and the adventure more meaningful.

As I cruised into Vermont on the tail-end of our bicycle adventure, I lagged behind my friends Gerry and Don by an

hour. We pedaled over hills, hills and more hills. Because I take a lot of pictures, I often fell back several miles.

It took me 15 minutes to get a great shot of a muskrat paddling across a glass-still pond. Nothing like wildlife animals going about their daily business. He created a V-wake behind him that cut across the pond. Two diving ducks created circles. When the V-wake intersected with the rippling circles, it created a great photograph. I love the creative magnificence of Mother Nature.

As for the speed of my bicycle, I call it the "pleasure pace" which means I enjoy every mile. Some call it "Eudemonia", "Satori", or "The Perfect Speed." It's the connection of mind, body and spirit coming together to form a natural "high" or "total happiness." When you pedal a bicycle through such beauty for eight hours a day, it transforms you and becomes a winsome dance. I've discovered over the years that bicycling pertains more to a spiritual experience than a physical one. No, I'm not saying it's a picnic busting over a 12,000-foot pass in the Rocky Mountains, but then, the views more than compensate. As you can see from the picture, I'd choose the mountains seven days a week.



(Frosty Wooldridge gazing at a sunset over a mountain pass that just took five hours to climb.)

Like all the New England states, Vermont provided such beauty, but suddenly, my rear tire suffered a flat. "Dang," I muttered to myself. "Those guys will be drinking beers and eating dinner by the time I catch up to them."

No matter, I stopped near a cable guardrail. As you can see



from the load on my bike "Condor", I had to pull a lot of gear off the back to get to the wheel. Just as I pulled the axle from the dropouts, an SUV passed me and honked. I waved.

(Frosty Wooldridge overlooking Niagara Falls and a double rainbow.)

As with all flat tires, I peeled the tire off the rim with my plastic levers. I checked the tube, found the glass chard that cut it, and patched it. I checked the rim tape for problems, then checked the tire for any other foreign objects and replaced it back onto the rim. After pumping it up, I dropped my solid axle back into the dropouts, replaced the nuts and aligned it. Then, I replaced the cables on the cantilever brakes. All in all, I spent 45 to 50 minutes.

After making sure the bike was roadworthy, I replaced my heavy pack (80 pounds), and bungee-corded it all back onto the rack. At that moment, I pulled my water bottle for a swig to quench my thirst. As I sat on the piling of the guard rail, that same SUV rolled to a stop across the highway. A kid jumped out with a pizza box and two cans of lemonade. He ran across the highway toward me.

"My dad said you might like some refreshments," he said. "He remembers when he rode his bicycle across the country after finishing college. He still talks about it. It was the best time of his life. He's got an 8"X10" photo of him and his buddies celebrating on the Atlantic Ocean right on his desk. Every day he sees it, that photo, it lights him up."

"Well thank you," I said, as I waved to the entire family.

“Good for your dad! I bet he’s got lots of stories to tell.”

“Yes sir,” the boy said. “He tells them around the campfire when we go camping. Somehow, he always comes up with a new one that makes us laugh.”

The boy crossed back over the road. Everyone in the car smiled. “Safe travels,” the father said. I waved, “Back at you!”



(My touring bike loaded with gear and an empty pizza box filled with kindness and memories of the goodness of folks around the world.)

They drove off. I sat there realizing that my two buddies were eating dinner and drinking beers up ahead, but as I sat there munching on the MOST incredible and best tasting pizza of my life. To this day, it will be the greatest pizza that I ever ate. Why? Because it was given to me on a very hot day in Vermont on a very lonely road. It rewarded me for fixing my flat tire. It tingled my tastebuds like no other pizza because of the kindness of other human beings. It was given with love, trust and a sense of connectedness that all of us humans carry in our hearts.

When I finished, I placed the empty pizza box on top of my pack. With the last gulp of lemonade, I flattened the two cans to be recycled when I reached the next town. I remounted my bike Condor and pedaled east with a big smile across my face and an even bigger one across my spirit.

“Darn,” I muttered to myself. “Sometimes, flat tires are a good thing!”

“Unexpected kindness is the most powerful, least costly, and most underrated agent of human change.” – Bob Kerrey

With that reality, over the years, I have always passed “kindness” forward. I compliment the store clerk about her necklace or earrings. I thank the waitress for her exemplary service with an extra-large tip. I salute the passing police officer because he works a dangerous job that maintains our society. I slap a \$5 bill into a homeless person's hand at some intersection. Why? But for the grace of God, that homeless person could be me. I thank a military person for his or her service to our country. I tell little kids what a great job they are doing as they draw chalk pictures with crayons in the driveway. I've picked up a million pieces of trash across six continents to make the Natural World more beautiful. It takes almost nothing to smile at anyone passing or giving a kind word.

It's wrapped up in this quote: “Love and kindness are never wasted. They always make a difference. They bless the one who receives them, and they bless you, the giver.” – Barbara De Angelis

Bless you on your own bicycle, walk, hike, canoe, raft or any other manner on your own individual journey. Frosty Wooldridge, 6 continent world bicycle traveler. And, God bless America and all her citizens. Bless every human being on this planet because every person is doing the best he or she can to make it through this life with kindness in some form or other.

*From that journey, I wrote a book: **Old Men Bicycle Across America: A Journey Beyond Old Age** by Frosty Wooldridge. (If you're a baby boomer, or anyone hoping to make such an epic ride across America, this book shows you how to do it, A to Z.)*

E-Mail Frosty: frostyw@juno.com