

One Mile at a Time: Cycling through Loss to Renewal

Dwight R. Smith

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Losing a family member can be a traumatic event. The author was devastated after losing two sons to needless traffic accidents and then a wife to illness. In 1984, at the age of sixty-three, Smith's therapy was to embark on a mammoth bicycle journey.

This three-phase trip, encompassing 13,784 miles through thirty-four states around the perimeter of the United States, would be the author's way of dealing with his losses and his desire to restore his faith in the world and heal his soul.

This book is a day-by-day account of the miles ticking off and the world he sees between the handlebars—a world he sees more intimately than he would from a speeding car on the Interstate. He narrates his thoughts into a tape recorder as he pedals, providing spontaneity and candor to the comments he makes about each incident.

The author, a professor of ecology and wildlife biology, had, over a lengthy teaching career, established a vast network of teaching associates, environmentally active friends, and former students, who gave him shelter during his journey. These same old friends—and new ones he meets along the way—enable him to reflect on his life and see the world through different eyes.

The book is sprinkled with this professor's sage observations on the environment, conservation, and logging practices. While pedaling along the southern California coast, he strikes up a conversation with a local resident, and learns that a nearby island had been a prime nesting ground for brown pelicans until the 1960s, when a Los Angeles chemical company flushed DDT storage tanks with seawater. The DDT then concentrated into the fish eaten by the pelicans, which caused a thinning of pelican eggshells. The pelican population plummeted. Only when public pressure forced the firm to change its practices did the pelican population return.

Wondering why Wisconsin is called The Badger State, Smith discovers that the term is a sobriquet that refers to "The badger-like diggings by Welsh miners recovering shallow deposits of lead during the mining rush of the 1820s."

And he never forgets the salt of the earth—the farmers and ranchers who are the backbone of this country. He mentions seeing a sign in a local restaurant: "Don't cuss the farmer while your mouth is full."

The author explains how his life has changed since this trip: "My rough edges have softened, and the gift of time has let me look deep within myself and become renewed."

KARL KUNKEL (September / October 2004)

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