

You can learn a lot on 2 wheels

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[JIM COYLE](#)

How very thoughtful and civic-minded of TTC employees to kick off Toronto's Bike Week yesterday with a work stoppage that showcased for the city the merits of two-wheeled locomotion.

Oh, it became clear early on from the bike lanes — with the steamy heat and cars jammed nose to tail as far as the eye could see — that air quality was going to be no great shakes. But, for one day at least, less was definitely more when it came to wheels, cyclists clipping downtown at a pace that must have seemed to stalled motorists worthy of the Autobahn.

Not for the first time, a pedaller zipping past taxis all but stationary, sullen passengers watching meters run, was moved to gratitude for the invention of such an ingenious machine and the lessons it has taught.

The learning began long years ago, a six-year-old aboard a red-and-white model from CCM, training wheels removed, the father running laps on a patch of asphalt at Greenwood Park to steady him, until the rider, finally feeling the absence of that hand on his back, looked around and realized he was on his own.

A jolt of terror. A momentary wobble. And then, nirvana! He was upright, solo — parents cheering with equal parts encouragement and apprehension — pedalling into an expanded world of independence and adventure.

Later, the first ``big boy'' bike would arrive on a Christmas morning. It took a while for the recipient to realize his heart's fondest wish had come true. He hadn't noticed it leaning against a wall when he'd bounded downstairs. Instead, beneath the tree, he found a box containing a bicycle bell. And it seemed, for an instant, as if Santa had perpetrated the cruellest hoax — a bell for a boy without a bike.

Then, eyes flew wide. There it was. That it was second-hand mattered not a whit. In time, the requisite doodads were applied and tricks mastered — clothes pegs and baseball cards to give it a soundtrack, banana seats and high handlebars to add some panache.

Eventually, about the time adolescence arrived, so did three-speeds. And how many summer days began with a question. ``Uwannagoridin?'' Destinations hardly mattered.

Usually, there were none. It was all in the journey. To Scarborough Bluffs. To Wilket Creek. Exploring the city, learning the side streets, the shortest distance between two points, and the longest way home.

What we didn't know then, of course, were bike riding's parallels to the rhythms of life — the alternating periods of exertion and coasting, the constant shifts and adjustments to preserve balance, the flat tires and broken chains, the wrong turns, the getting lost, the finding your way again.

On bikes, we learned all kinds of things. Some of us even made money on them, delivering for grocery or drug stores.

It took no time at all, on winter deliveries, to learn that if you fumbled a bit while trying to make change from the coin pouch, then blew on your fingers as if they were numb, the lady of the house would invariably enlarge the tip.

But it took the more seasoned delivery boys to fill us in on what it was we were actually delivering — the little packages so easy to carry being birth-control pills, they said, the unwieldy cases of infant formula needed by those who'd neglected to use the former.

In such ways were the facts of life learned. And the education went on. Not least of all that shattering of illusion when a cherished bike was stolen, and trust in the world and its people was diminished forever.

How much did we love them? One boy of precociously literary bent called his trusty steed Dulcinea (though his peers found that a little goofy). And you swipe more than a bike when you make off with that.

Over the years, there were scrapes from falls and cuts and bruises from ill-advised dare-devilling. Once, in a local ravine, a young rider learned the inevitable outcome of run-ins with immovable objects. The rock in his path, as he bounced downhill, was the last thing

the boy remembered seeing before his front wheel hit it and stopped dead, the rider travelling on, first to a rocky landing, then a hospital bed.

The bike, to my delight, was repaired and ready for action again before I was.

Once, on a long-ago Friday night, two teenaged brothers learned the cost of impulsivity aboard bicycles. On a whim, they decided to pedal to a friend's cottage, about 185 kilometres away. They decided to leave at midnight in order to beat the traffic.

By about Darlington, they were pretty sure a mistake had probably been made. But they'd come too far to turn back. So they pedalled on, through a hellish night of farm dogs, fatigue, hunger and regret.

Until about noon the next day, when a journey often boasted of (but never undertaken again) rolled to a merciful end.

And by gosh, here we are again. Point B. Via the scenic route.

The better way by far.

Jim Coyle usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.