

FAMILY VALUES: THE BENEFITS OF BIKE COMMUTING

I've been riding a bike in New York City for 34 years. Which is how long I've been biking, period. Yes, I learned to ride here as an adult.

I ride at any time, in any weather. Last July, I had a meeting at Columbia Presbyterian in Washington Heights. What began as a light rain was a downpour. I arrived soaked, but the change of clothes stowed in my pannier stayed dry. Two weeks later, on the Hudson River bike path from the Upper West Side to Tribeca, I was enveloped in a swirling thunderstorm. I laughed all the whole way home.

Used to be, when I got in a pickle on the bike, I would summon up memories of my mountaineering scrapes to see me through. Now, when the mountain is daunting, I call on my NYC biking memories for courage.

I started keeping a daily log of my cycling miles in 2001, mostly to see how far I hauled my kids, who were then seven and four. (I don't have an odometer, but my mathematical mind easily computes the day's mileage.) In this time I've averaged 2,500 miles a year without passengers, plus 250 miles with one or both kids perched on a top-tube seat or riding a clamped-on one-wheeler. That makes 3,000 "person-miles" each year—peanuts, perhaps, for serious club riders, but not bad for a dad who's no longer free to ride weekly to Nyack or Westchester.

Memorable kid-towing: during the 2005 transit strike, riding my older son to and from middle school on York Ave. on a borrowed tandem; Saturday morning trips with my younger son to the eye doctor in Midtown; and for the four months our local school was shuttered after September 11, daily commutes to PS 3 in the West Village. The top-tube seat, which forces me to lower my seat for balance, is a bummer for pedaling efficiency. But nothing beats the intimacy of enfolding my kid in my arms, the two of us chatting and singing while we fly.

I ride for more reasons than I can name. But for starters, I ride because:

I love being outdoors.

I like feeling in control.

It's quick.

It's free.

It's a rebuke to the corporate machinery that makes most

Americans travel trapped in an automobile.

While I'm riding, time is suspended.

I feel like a champion athlete.

"In cycling, everything depends on the self."—Wolfgang Sachs

It connects me to people everywhere who ride bikes.

Once in a while traffic seems to move to my will, giving
me two blocks of empty pavement.

My cycling speed is fast enough to get me there but slow
enough to register what I'm passing through.

Every ride is different.

It's healthy for me and the planet.

It feels good.

I've been a vocal bike advocate for most of my cycling years. I dearly want the cycling environment made so excellent that a million or more New Yorkers will ride every day—and so safe that crashes are uncommon and deaths unheard of. I want New York to be a world model for cycling and give billions of Chinese and Indians and Indonesians reason to slam the door on forced motorization.

But for now, I take things as they are, and just ride.

Charles Komanoff, an economist, "re-founded" Transportation Alternatives in the 1980s and helped start the traffic-justice advocacy group Right Of Way in the 1990s.