

Learning to Ride a Bicycle

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January, 2022

My mom, who is now 87 years old, has had a lot of experience with people over the years. She once told me that people don't change.

When I was five or six years old, my parents gave me a bike. Like many middle-class kids in those days, I didn't get a new bike. My bike was a hand me down machine, from where it came, I don't recall. It could have been one of my older brothers' machines, or reclaimed from a barn on one of my grand-fathers farms. Or perhaps it came from my uncle Nelson, who always had vehicles of all kinds in his garage, though his vehicles were usually gasoline powered.

Even though my bike wasn't new, my parents made it special, by customizing it for me. They painted the frame fire engine red, with white trim. The wheel's rims were also painted white, which contrasted nicely with the black tires. Best of all, on the head-tube, I had my own custom head-badge. On the white head-tube was a large red capital M inside the outline of a large red square.

Mechanically, the bike was very simple. The pedals were directly connected to the rear wheel. There was no freewheel or brakes. If the rear wheel turned, so did the pedals and vice versa. There was no coasting on that bike. Today, bicycle people call that style of bike a fixie. These days, no self-respecting cyclist, or adult of any sort would give a five or six year old kid a bike without brakes, but that's what I got. Technically, if you pushed backwards on the pedals you

can slow down a fixie, but I can tell you from personal experience that it's not a real effective way to stop.

Fixies get the name from the fact that they have fixed gearing. Olympic track racers use fixies because they race on a closed track without hills and do not have to change gears to go up or down hills or break for traffic or anything else for that matter. These days, a few, but growing number of hard-core cyclists use fixies on hilly terrain and in traffic to commute to work and for various other purposes. They like them because they are simple and light. Due to the lack of brakes and absence of gears to climb hills they are not for the average cyclist.

My bike had tubeless tires, I think 20" in size, but they could have been smaller. Having tubeless tires is another very modern concept that has become very popular within the last few years. Though my first bike's tires had no inner tubes, unlike modern tubeless tires, my bike's tires also had no air, as the bike had solid rubber tires. This made for a rough ride, but also simplified maintenance. When I got the bike, I didn't know how to ride, so the rough ride didn't really matter, at least to start with.

Unlike so many other kids that are taught to ride a bike by parents or other older mentors, I taught myself to ride this new bike. Of all my early memories, this monumental effort remains etched in my memory like few others. We had a garage behind the house that was reached by a gravel alley that crossed the rear of our property. That garage had a cement slab floor. The sliding barn doors opened to a gravel driveway that lead to the alley. As you exited the garage, on the left of our drive way, was a small grassy area and then the garage of one of our neighbors. On the right of the driveway was a small gentle grassy berm that went down from the level of the driveway to our back yard, which was a bit lower than the driveway.

My dad must have been at work when I learned to ride the bicycle, as normally he would have his car in the garage when at home. During those days, if my dad was at work, my mom probably was as well, as they both worked most week days. We had an elderly babysitter, Mrs Strunk, who usually didn't venture out of the house, so I was on my own.

My plan was to start in the garage as I thought the smooth concrete floor would make pedaling easier when compared to gravel or grass, the other alternatives. The idea was to pedal across the smooth concrete floored garage and out onto the gravel driveway. If I got that far, I could then come up with a new plan as to where to go next.

Oh, I forgot to mention, this bike of mine didn't have training wheels. In actual practice, I would get on the bike, pedal a few times and the bike would then fall over, usually to the right. I don't recall exactly how many times I would jump off the falling bike without going down myself versus going down with the bike, but I know both types of crashes occurred. I spent a couple of days doing this, before I could actually make it out the garage, only to crash in a similar way on the gravel driveway. Eventually, I made progress and distinctly remember the glorious moment when I made it out of the garage, onto the driveway and started a gradual semi-controlled right turn that took me down the berm onto the lawn. I continued that right turn until I had completely circled around to the other side of the garage. At that moment I felt that I had reached a tipping point, and knew that I could master my bicycle.

Never was a little kid so proud of his achievement than I was at that moment. I was the first kid in my neighborhood peer group that would master bike riding. It must have been soon after this that one of my parents took a picture of a number of the neighborhood kids with their tricycles and me on that bike.

Maybe my mom was right, I still love riding my bikes, despite crashing them on occasion.

