

One Chico Christmas Eve

It was like a miracle, and yet it was just the opposite, a tragedy had brought us together. Ed McLaughlin had been grievously injured on a sunny winter solstice day's bicycle ride amidst the beauty of Bidwell Park. What had happened was unthinkable. We were all yet ignorant of the injury, but were in a communal state of fear and shock, and to be honest, we were terrified that our worst fears were likely true---that Ed would be paralyzed for life---the most feared injury any of us could imagine. But these terrible, swirling fears were buried, silenced inside us, in hope and prayers and desperate thoughts send out from Chico's town square on that cold, dark night, that somehow he would recover to ride his bicycle again. For how could there be an Ed without a bicycle?

I still do not know where we all had come from or how everyone had heard, but there we all were---passionate bicyclists, or simply friends who had known Ed for years, many for decades. We had coalesced from our places of abode into that dark square, our spirits in terrible pain. We had all left our lives behind that special winter's night---no matter what each of us believed---to somehow, in some magical way, some pre-psychiatry, caveman staring into the stars and darkness, pre-self-consciousness, primordial manner---to heal Ed.

We all stood there in the dark and cold talking, worrying, not knowing what to say, how to feel, how to not fear the worst. Ed was far away in some hospital somewhere, and we were where he would want to be, in Chico, his adopted home, Chico, the City of Trees, and I thought---in large part due to Ed---the City of Bicycles. I had not been there on that winter solstice ride when Ed's life had changed instantly, but the winter solstice had been forever changed in my heart. I ride my a bicycle pretty much every day, and every time I ride, every time I have ridden since that

winter solstice, I think of Ed, and how much he would love to be riding too. It was more powerful and painful when Ed was alive, but I still think of him every single time I ride.

We all stood in the town square, probably more than a hundred of us, holding hands in a circle that in my memory, encompassed the entire heart of the square. I stood holding the hand of a man I had been on rides with for twenty years---a fit, strong college professor and yet a stoic man of few words---and there we stood in only what I can call a moment of psychological and spiritual impact. A moment we, none of us, would never forget. I squeezed his hand with force, trying to convey what words were helpless to express. We all stood there beneath the stars, holding hands in a great circle of fear and sadness and the intense hopeful and hopeless hope that something that has happened can be somehow reversed, or that its outcome will not be as bitter, as terrible as we fear. Like hoping that we will always live with love and health and happiness, and that those we love will always be with us, forever.

Ed had committed his life to bicycling and to its joy and freedom and the beauty it brings to life, to living, and to the good it does for places where bicycling is encouraged and cherished by its populace. Ed knew intimately the wonders cycling brings to a bicyclist's life, the health---both physical and mental---the wonderful psychological sense of well-being that comes with cycling, where all of the senses merge, the physical into the mental, into the spiritual, the universal, which can then flow into seeing and feeling the world, the splendor of Nature, our bodies, the Earth, the sky, the air, the mountains, valleys, the sweat flowing from our skin, the blood and oxygen pulsing through our brains, our minds filled with the scent of the trees, the grasses, the flowers, the fields, and all, all, everything, becomes one.

It has been five years since that Christmas Eve. The courage and spirit Ed exhibited in dealing with his fearsome injury was profoundly moving, his body

paralyzed, but his spirit---from what I saw---incredibly, incredibly, vibrant and full of life under circumstances that left us all mutely fearful.

I will never forget that Christmas Eve in the heart of Chico, when we all stood there in that big circle, each of us praying desperately inside ourselves and with all of the others, there for our friend, standing in the star-scattered darkness at the turning of the year, there in this small Sacramento Valley town, on this Earth, in the depths of space, in the midst of the unimaginably vast ocean of the universe, at the turning of a life, a turning of all our souls and spirits, knowing how desperately precious is one life, and all of our lives.