

Chapter 1

Day 1:

August 14, 2006. Winooski VT to Bradford VT. 72 miles. 6.30 am to 3 pm.

So many single shoes, never pairs.

The edges of any given road are a plethora of human detritus. Of all the cups and plastic bags and clothing, paint buckets and other odd bits and pieces, the most plentiful were the single shoes. All kinds of shoes; boots, sneakers, sandals, women's dress, men's dress and more sneakers and always there was never a pair. Being the ever pondering philosopher, it gave me much to think about as I journeyed.

The thing about bicycling is that it is rather slow going. At least if you are touring. Your average speed is 8 – 10 mph so you have a lot of time to take in the road and the environment. It gives you time to think. Think about all those single shoes. How much like me, alone on the road. Was this a symbol of society in general; a mass of lonely, single shoes looking but never finding the other side of the pair? Or maybe it was just symbolic of my life, always feeling alone, looking but never finding where I belonged or with whom. Perhaps I would lose myself in this journey to find my true nature, my Dharma?

My Dharma for the next five days was to bicycle, only to push the foot pedals round and round and round and...round, being lulled by the hum of the tires. I set out asking Spirit for a vision quest not knowing how foolishly unaware I was of what that actually meant. The passing miles this trip promised became the most painful mental and physical and emotional I had ever experienced yet at the same time it was the most awesome, exhilarating and life changing.

My journey began at 6:30am on a Monday morning. How does any journey start? From a thought or an idea; a childhood dream or one born of trauma; or maybe another lifetime's karma needing fulfillment? I often do not know what motivates me to do such things. It can be one of those, "sounded like a good idea at the time" kind of thing. I was in the mindset of chasing spirituality and the awakened state. I wanted a journey of self-discovery. I felt I needed to do this as a rite of passage, to become the triumphant warrior I wanted to be so badly. To be recognized, loved and admired as often I had not felt as a child. Reasons are sometimes impossible to define, one just needs to do that thing to discover just how silly they are, or powerful.

I had been using my middle name of Alex for some time but legally and to most I was still Ritch. I hadn't yet changed it to today's Alexander Orion but then my father was still alive and living not only in Connecticut, but inside my head. I wanted to be Orion! To be the mythical hero, enlightened and divine living in deep peace and oneness with God. But was that the true mythical giant of a man who was killed either for his deep love of Artemis or by a massive scorpion for his boastfulness. Both seem to be the same tragedy to me. Love or boastfulness, do they not always lead to the same end?

So this Monday morning saw me ride off with delusions of grandeur and the hero's journey ahead. I was riding an ox to go and find an ox (as the old Buddhist proverb about enlightenment goes). Only my ox was a bicycle I had named Kermit loaded with the things I thought would bring me the adventure I was seeking.

The ride to Montpelier VT was mostly uneventful, only slightly challenging. I was expectant, hopeful, excited and ready for the revelations to start flowing. The thing is... going deep inside, getting dirty and looking at all the ugly; awakening to this journey of spiritual awakening... it is never easy or very pretty.

Yet, I felt I was ready and anticipated the revelations to be flowing in short order. I was expecting to be so enlightened by journey's end that I would be exploding with self-realization! I was on a vision quest after all and I hoped for nothing less. That, of course, was at the beginning well before the eight-mile hill, the endless peddling and the emotional maelstrom; it was actually before a lot of things.

I reached Montpelier about mid-morning and stopped for a bagel and coffee. Things so far, were easy. I called Trish, my sister, to let her know where I was and how things were going. I had consumed a couple of Cliff bars (the first of many such bars, maybe the last of such bars) during the ride to Vermont's capital and finished off most of the water in the sport bottles. I realized more money was going to be spent on water and Gatorade than food during this trip.



I was ready to begin what my buddy Steve from the Vermont Children's Aid Society had pre-warned me of... "The Eight-Mile Hill". I had talked with him as a fellow cyclist about the route and he was hesitant about the path I had chosen. He thought I had too much weight on the bike as well but I was too much of a newbie to listen. I had spent the past several months preparing so I thought I was perfectly capable. It would become apparent along the way that I was not as prepared as I thought myself to be but found that I certainly was capable.

At this point I don't know if the swearing started straight off or if it really reached its peak sometime later in the trip. To say the eight-mile hill was simply a challenge on a bicycle with full panniers (saddlebags for a bicycle) is like learning to swim with your hands tied behind your back.

It is needless to say I stopped many times to rest and contemplate my sanity about undertaking this ride. On one such break there was at a bridge crossing a quiet brook I thought was picturesque. So I decided to take a photo of the bike as I had seen many such photos in bicycle blogs. Taking the photo just as a semi sped by, I could see the bike falling from the backwash before it actually moved. Then it went over spilling the contents of the handlebar bag on the road. I crossed the road praying none of the cars following the truck ran over my stuff. The first thing I noticed upon picking the bike up was the mirror had been broken. My stuff on the road, the mirror broken, this damn long hill, all became fuel for the diatribe about truck drivers. That guy did it on purpose, the

drivers who got a little too close to me on the road did it on purpose; all of them did it on purpose, &*%\$\$#@&*! As I have a CDL and able to drive one of those trucks, it later became kind of amusing; I was cursing myself even though I am not presently employed driving a truck. All the same the anger begins, oh not the full-blown stuff yet, not really the good stuff yet, but it's coming.

Finally, through a series of riding and walking the bike up this unforgiving mountain, the peak was crested. Jubilation! Exasperation! Exhaustion! I decided to rest in celebration of my minor victory with a little turkey jerky and Gatorade and contemplate the rest of the trip. The place where I had stopped was at the side of the road; on the grassy area just at the edge of a place where it dropped into a low gully...with tall grass...hiding standing water...mucky standing water...can anyone see where this is going? I thought it should have been a piece of cake to lift the bike back up from its lying position, but this was to be a comedy of errors and as with all comedy of errors, things became just that. Maybe it was an omen of things to come; maybe there just was too much weight because as I lifted the bike, the front wheel took the rest of what was attached to it and headed further into waiting grass and murky water. Determined not to let the bike fall, it pulled me along into the swampy deeps. Ok, it was only enough to soak the shoes, but after the long climb it was enough to qualify as an anger management moment. This was just the first day; I couldn't wait for the real fun to begin (read sarcasm)!

The upside was the 20 or so miles into Bradford VT. It was a great ride down, and I was very grateful for the joy of coasting. The wind had cooled me, as well as my temper. I started to notice the little things, like how whoever measures distances along this particular stretch of road is mileage challenged, or maybe Bradford exists in a time warp where its exact placement is sort of known but cannot be pinned down. I say this because one road sign clocked Bradford at 7 miles. About 3 miles later there's another for Bradford 6 miles. Then a mile later Bradford 3 miles, less than a mile onward, Bradford 1 mile! It must have been me, long first day.



I thought about continuing on towards New Hampshire as it was only 3pm but enough was enough. So I found the one motel in Bradford and settled in for the rest of the day. Not only was it a motel but an Indian restaurant too! Great! I was looking forward to a good meal of Indian fare even though I was not the least bit hungry. Probably a good thing as the restaurant was closed on Mondays. Things could be worse.

I took a shower and started to feel better. Now time to get something to eat, though I still was not really hungry. That surprised me as I thought I would be ravenous. I biked down the street to the supermarket I passed earlier and picked up chicken and potato salad along with water and Gatorade. Dinner is served!



I need to go back a little and give some history about what was to transpire. The short of it is this: panic attacks that have been a part of my life since about the age of 18. For one obvious reason, I now see in older

years, they occurred because I just did not have enough self-confidence or worth. I called it many things but it comes down to that. It can be very self-destructive those feelings of worthlessness, it can also become habit forming. One gets used to having certain feelings and a pattern is formed. No matter how bad that pattern is for oneself, it is familiar and hard to let go. Again, any Buddhist will tell you this pearl of wisdom.

I sought many avenues to relieve myself of the attacks themselves. When the first one struck I had no idea what was happening, just fear out of nowhere. Alcohol became a destructive dark alley, haunted more than helpful. A more positive avenue was seeking professional help; the best of which was energy/creative visualization with a woman in Connecticut. With her help I had the most beneficial growth and was introduced to Orion.

More recently I have been introduced to Ativan. I had been presented with other wonder pills but the side effects outweighed the benefits, in my mind anyway, and really, it is all a mind trip. Ativan seemed to do the trick for me though. It acts quickly, no need to build up to a certain therapeutic level, no real side effects (well the possibility of addiction I guess). I used it sparingly and though I haven't needed any in quite sometime I carried a small amount with me always, just in case. I had some with me on this trip, in my handlebar bag... the contents of which had spilled on the road... at the bridge... 20 plus miles back the way I had come. Oh yes, God was giving me a true vision quest. Thank you God, I really didn't like the wrapping but thank you for the gift. Boy, what a gift!

So, back in my motel room I sat contemplating all the stuff I packed into the panniers. Everything from both panniers and the handlebar bag lay unpacked on the bed when it dawned on me; the small container with the Ativan is gone. Not there...nowhere in all the stuff that suddenly became very unimportant, there were bigger concerns now. The Ativan is just not there, time to panic...or at least contemplate panic!

I was to call my sister Trish each day to let her know of my progress and safety. I don't know what I would have done without her or our friend Paul for that fact. Even with the physical distance between us; it was comforting to hear their voices. Trish and I talked a little bit about the trip to that point and the loss of my 'security blanket' as it became known. She helped me to maintain my path with her compassion and love and Paul even suggested driving to me with more of my 'security blanket' but that didn't seem right. We all decided I was going to be just fine...maybe.

An odd thing happened when I first noticed the Ativan was gone, a wave of relief swept through me, it was odd because I had relied on always having the little stash I with me, just in case. How could I be relieved by this loss? I still don't have an answer to that one. Even so it was quickly replaced by not quite panic. God, in Her infinite wisdom, was giving me the vision quest I asked had for; She knew what I could handle even though I didn't. At that time it was beginning to look like not just a vision quest, but journey of facing those inner fears as well. That time was also the birth of alternate plans. I could bicycle to Lebanon N.H. and rent a car, drive back, get a supply of Ativan and drive back to my stopping point. Or, I could rent a car and end journey. What the hell was I trying to prove anyway? How much abuse was I about to take? Go back or go on? Uncertainty had a grip on me, but this was to be a vision quest. These things are not easy... they are not supposed to be easy.

The night began in this manic obsession with the missing 'security blanket'. I turned the television on more for distraction than anything else, hoping to find something

to put my mind on other than the possibilities of panic. Was I distracted? In a way I was actually appalled. I had not watched television in more than a year and it had actually gotten worse. If nothing else, I realized I hadn't missed much. But that is just my opinion, some people like watching television. In my case I was reaching out for something to replace the uncomfortable thoughts playing ping-pong in my head.

Again the plans for escape popped into the mind. Plans...plans...plans for the quick escape back home and to continue onward or to just quit. Go back or go on? Quit? Go back or go on? This one event was to set-up the mindset for the days to follow. "You don't have your 'security blanket,'" went the voice in my mind, "what are you going to do if a panic attack strikes?" 'What ifs', 'what ifs' was what I now had, how our 'what ifs' can so rule our lives if we let them.

I did not go back home. For the moment, I did not stop obsessing either. I did fall asleep... eventually.

Aches and pains: Stiff left knee, butt, arm pain in the elbows, shoulder pain and the three middle toes of the left foot hurt.

Food for the day: Cliff bars, turkey jerky, bagel with cream cheese, sesame sticks, chicken and potato salad and lots of water/Gatorade.

Weather: Was pleasant and sunny maybe in the lower 80s.