

***Church and the Art of Bicycle Maintenance***  
**Sermon by the Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka**  
**August 24, 2008**

**Reading from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance***  
**By Robert Persig**

The study of the art of motorcycle maintenance is really a miniature study of the art of rationality itself. Working on a motorcycle, working well, caring, is to become part of a process, to achieve an inner peace of mind...

[My friends, John and Sylvia,] sign off every time the subject of cycle repair comes up, even when it's obvious [they are] suffering for it... They talk once in a while in as few pained words as possible about "it" or "it all" as in the sentence, "There is just no escape from it"... I thought "it" was more mysterious than technology. But now I see that the "it" was mainly, if not entirely, technology. But, that doesn't sound right either. The "it" is a kind of force that gives rise to technology, something undefined, but inhuman, mechanical, lifeless, a blind monster, a death force. Something hideous they are running from but know they can never escape. I'm putting it way too heavily here but in a less emphatic and less defined way this is what it is.

...I disagree with [my friends] about cycle maintenance, but not because I am out of sympathy with their feelings about technology. I just think that their flight from and hatred of technology is self-defeating. The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower. To think otherwise is to demean the Buddha – which is to demean oneself.

***Church and the Art of Bicycle Maintenance***  
**Sermon delivered by Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

Twenty-four years ago this month, at the age of 18, I embarked on an adventure of a lifetime, crossing the continent of North America on my bicycle from Port Angeles, Washington, to Gainesville, Florida. Never before had I engaged in such a spectacular life-altering journey through the geography of this country or through the geography of my own spirit. And though I've been on many other journeys since then, no other adventure has been quite as wonderful as that first one.

I bicycled with a friend as we rode eastward from the Olympic Peninsula over the Cascade Mountains, the apple orchards and deserts of eastern Washington, along the Clearwater River of northern Idaho, over the Rocky Mountains of Montana, across the vast plains of Wyoming, eastern Colorado and Nebraska, through the wheat fields of eastern Kansas and Missouri, the small and rugged Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, the humid cotton fields of Mississippi and Alabama, along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, and through the flat, sandy pine forests of northern Florida.

It was a glorious trip. It is a memory that I remain extremely fond of, and a memory I return to often, especially each year when August rolls around. Over the years, the context of this bike trip has evolved as my life has evolved. Originally, it was based on a simple desire to

get out of Florida (where our family lived at the time), get away from family for a while, and escape some painful high school experiences. As I've gotten older, this bike trip has grown in the mythology of my own life story into a heroic and life-defining journey.

But the bike trip was not without its difficulties, and it did not come without a great deal of preparation.

Like other kids, when I was little I had a bike. I learned to ride when I was somewhere around six years old. I crashed in the middle of a street once because I didn't yet know how to brake or turn the handlebars. I imitated Evel Knievel by setting up a board on a wooden box, and I jumped over friends who volunteered to lie down on the ground on the other side of the wooden box. At about 12 years old I once did a wheelie, came down sideways and hit the pavement with my mouth...which is how I got these chipped front teeth.

In seventh grade I rode my Huffy dirt bike five miles to my junior high. In eighth grade I got myself a used Sears ten-speed, and raced the city buses full of classmates home to our neighborhood. Because they had to take two buses, and because I was fast, I always beat my friends home.

At the end of eighth grade I had saved up \$300 from my paper route to buy myself a brand new Japanese bike called a Sekai. It was a dream. It was light, fast and strong. It was the bike I eventually took on my trip across the country. I still have the bike and sometimes ride it even now.

I bought the bike at a small, independent bike shop on the north side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and the guys there taught me some basics of bicycle maintenance. Because it was new when I got it, they showed me how to tape the handlebars. As they installed the brakes and shifters, they showed me how the cables worked and where they attached to the bike frame and derailleurs. Later, under some minimal guidance from my older brother and his friends, I bought a chain tool and learned how to remove the bike chain and clean it – always outside in the driveway – with a toothbrush and gasoline. I slowly began to buy more tools and learned how to adjust the brakes, the shifters, fix a flat inner tube, and change a tire. Then I got myself a spoke wrench and learned how to adjust spokes just enough to make my rims true. After a few more years I learned that the squeak from a bottom bracket – the axle assembly at the bottom of a bike's frame around which the pedals rotate – comes from worn bearings. So I bought the tools and learned how to take apart and fix the bottom bracket on my bike.

In high school I never owned a car. I just rode my bike everywhere, all year long. That is a little easier to do in Florida, but still a challenge. When I took guitar lessons one year, I carried my guitar under one arm as I rode my bike to the guitar studio. I had a rack over the back wheel of my bike, so every day I strapped my book bag to the rack and rode five miles to school. After school I ran in track or in cross-country, and then after practice I would ride the five miles home once again. When I went to a friend's house, or wanted to go to a movie, I rode my bike. I rode my bike everywhere, all the time (I feel sorry for my children when they turn 16 and ask if they can borrow the car – I can only imagine what I will say! I'll probably even let them know I did all that riding barefoot...in the snow, and uphill, both ways!).

For many years, my bike was one of my closest companions. We moved to Florida at the beginning of my ninth grade year, and my dad was diagnosed with a terminal illness a couple years later. I didn't have good friends for a few years and I often felt alone. But I found great joy in riding and maintaining my bike. It was one place I could escape into myself but still interact with the outside world. Over time, the bike riding and maintenance became less of an escape and more of a spiritual practice.

I learned that on flat land I could maintain a 20-mile-per-hour pace for hours at a time. I loved feeling the wind and road flow past me. In his novel, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Persig writes:

On a cycle the frame is gone...You're in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming. That concrete whizzing by five inches below your foot is the real thing, the same stuff you walk on, it's right there, so blurred you can't focus on it, yet you can put your foot down and touch it anytime, and the whole thing, the whole experience, is never removed from immediate consciousness.

Though Robert Persig was talking about riding a motorcycle, that description is very similar to the experience I have riding a bicycle. I love the feeling of power that flows through me and into the pedals and through the chain and into the tires and onto the road. I love feeling the pedal cadence, rhythmically rotating hour after hour.

In high school I usually rode alone, and I never rode with headphones of any sort. I tried it a couple times, but I just felt too cut off from the outside world. From a safety standpoint, I often could not hear cars that were coming up behind me, but I also could not fully experience the pavement and grass, the birds and the dogs and air, the wind, the hum of the rubber tires – the life – all around me.

I found that I really liked the thoughts going through my head. I learned to appreciate the solitude and the quiet. I learned that having that time alone, pushing my body through rhythmic physical motions allowed my mind to process things I could not otherwise process. I found the repetitive physical motion of pedaling to be meditative, and that when I returned home hours later, to the world of people once again, I felt refreshed. I felt expansive. I felt I had more perspective on what went on inside our tiny human house and in my tiny high school life. I felt more able to tolerate, forgive and engage my family and friends.

Learning about the bike and learning about myself were inseparable. When I took apart the bottom bracket of my bike, I recall realizing that I was one of the very few people in this world who ever saw this part of the inside of my bicycle. The practice of learning how to take things apart and look at the inside, examining how they worked, and observing how they affect other parts became an art.

A bicycle is beautifully simple. Its form is basic to its function. Of course, these days a high performance bike can sell for tens of thousands of dollars. But bikes in general have very few frills that are not related to their overall purpose.

Each part on a bike is integral to every other part. A seat is needed to hold the human engine, pedals are needed for the human engine power to intersect with the machine and transfer power, and a chain is needed to transfer the power to the wheel. Wheels are necessary for forward motion, handlebars for steering, brakes for stopping. Spokes keep the wheel round and true, hubs and ball bearings allow the wheel and pedals to spin, rubber tires keep the ride smooth. As the primary conveyor of energy into motion, a chain needs to be light, strong and flexible, transferring power from the large, solid, stationary objects of human and machine into the rapidly spinning back wheel. For the merely practical purpose of forward motion, a multitude of gears are a luxury – but the different sizes do make it easier for us to go up hill, or to go faster downhill.

Finally, a good frame holds all the parts together. A good frame is rigid, but light. A rigid frame channels as much energy as possible directly from the pedals into the road, without

dissipating through sideways motion or flexing joints. A light frame requires less energy to transport over long distances, and it allows the rider to move more quickly in times of danger or when decisions need to be made on short notice.

No other machine on earth that will give you as much forward motion per unit of energy you put into it. Given the ratio of energy input compared to forward motion, bicycles are the most efficient machines ever created.

In general, I am a person slow to accept advances in technology. Like Robert Persig's friends, I am a little scared of it, and very uncertain what to do when it breaks down. But I use computers, I use email, I have a cell phone, and I drive a car that – by the standards of my previous vehicle – is quite high-tech. As reluctant as I am sometimes to go with the flow of new technology, I also keep in mind my own knowledge of bicycle maintenance and recognize one of the lessons Persig was trying to teach: that “The Buddha...resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower. To think otherwise is to demean the Buddha – which is to demean oneself.”

It is not technology itself that is at issue here. Rather, the issue is how we engage systems that seem too big and too scary to understand – or even how we engage our own inner fears and confusion. The practice – especially when we make it into a daily spiritual practice – of learning how to take things apart and look at the inside, examining how they work, and observing how they affect other parts becomes an art.

As we here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka move from August into September, we are transitioning into a new program year. Our seasonal staff have just returned for the fall programming. Our religious education program for children and youth starts up again in a few weeks. Adult education classes are gearing up. Our Wednesday night soup suppers and choir rehearsals will resume. In three weeks we will return to two Sunday morning services.

We also have several new initiatives, ideas and energy floating around. The Board is engaged in learning about some new governance models; the Relocation Task Force is guiding us through the Wayzata City Council for approval for a new church site construction of a new church building; the Committee on Ministry is working on a draft of a congregational covenant; I am in the midst of training a group of six people to provide more spiritual care for the congregation; the Worship Arts Ministry continues to explore ways to make our worship more relevant and meaningful, and the Social Action Ministry is exploring and acting on ways this congregation may be involved in the wider community.

To any new person walking through the doors of this church, we appear to be a vibrant and happening place. And we are! But we also need to remember that, like any other organization, we are a system. Systems can be confusing, intimidating, oppressive, conservative and exclusive. When they are healthy though, systems can also be supportive, clear, inclusive, inspiring, and can help channel energy into an appropriate direction.

Our church system, like the system of a bicycle, has many moving parts. Each part is necessary in order to ensure our forward motion. We can make many metaphors – the Board may be like the handlebars, providing the rest of us with direction; the Church Council may be like the engine, providing energy for our forward motion; each person who teaches a Sunday school class or paints a wall or makes coffee or provides spiritual care, worship, or music, may be like a spoke, a wheel, a ball bearing, a gear, or a link in the drive train.

All the individual parts are necessary in order for us to function. But no matter how invested we are in each of our individual parts, it is important for us to continually discover, re-discover, and understand what brings us all together. It is important for us to be aware of our frame.

A good frame holds all the parts together. A good frame is both rigid and light. A rigid frame channels as much energy as possible directly from the pedals into the road, without dissipating through sideways motion or flexing joints. A light frame requires less energy to transport over long distances, and it allows the rider to move more quickly in times of danger or when decisions need to be made on short notice.

I'm not quite sure what our frame might be – but I do have some ideas. It may be that our congregational frame is our bylaws. It may be that our frame is the congregational covenant being worked on by the Committee on Ministry. It may be that we will discover parts of our frame as we explore more of the questions this fall around why we gather as a religious community. It may be that our frame has yet to be articulated.

I do know though that all the bikes I've had needed maintenance. So it is with our church. This isn't something we assemble in 1963 – when this congregation began – and never touch again. It also isn't something we reassemble in 2007 – when I arrived – and never touch again. The continued health and forward motion of a system requires continued maintenance. At our best, we will do at least three things well: first of all, the more we participate in the pedaling the more we will be able to enjoy the ride; second, when individual parts begin to wear, we will adjust or clean the part because we will be able to see far ahead and understand how the wearing could affect the whole system; and 3) if something does escape our early notice and breaks, we will know immediately how to fix it.

Learning about the bike and learning about our selves are inseparable. The spiritual life calls us to the task of finding the Buddha in the gears of a bike, the silicone of a computer chip, or in the system of our congregational structure. The continual practice of learning how to take things apart and look inside, examining how they work and how they affect other parts, becomes an art. As we engage these questions, and as we engage each other, we are no longer spectators; we transform into participants. Transformation, after all, is at least part of what the frame – and the direction – of the church is all about.