



An Unlikely Alliance

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Comes a collective shout, “CAR!” when a vehicle passes the mass of assembled wheels (bicycles, adult tricycles, scooters, and other odd contraptions). Riders then scurry to the side of the road. “Wave to every car,” I urge the kids, “and people will become tolerant of our ‘owning’ the street this couple of hours every evening.” And so it goes.

Residents along the half-mile circle that makes up our neighborhood route come out of their houses to enjoy the wild, noisy romp. We are admired for our playfulness. “Howl like a wolf,” someone will shout, and seven to 15 riders raise chin to a united howling. Or cry like a baby, waah, waah! Seven-year old Anthony throws his bike and body to the ground in wail and fit, a crying contest ensues.

This unlikely alliance evolved without plan or forethought. It just happened. I borrowed a neighbor Meghan’s adult tricycle to try it out—and loved it. So I bought one in mid-March, just as the Coronavirus pandemic was rearing its ugly head, simply to enjoy easy riding near home.

Meghan, 36 years old, began to ride with me most evenings. Her even, always-pleasant disposition with Down’s syndrome has taught me about being in the very moment I exist. It’s as if she holds time in the palm of her hand. There was no yesterday and tomorrow is irrelevant.

Those early days of the pandemic had many of us frightened to near paralysis. I stayed sheltered, while others shopped for me. (I’m in that high-risk group, heading toward 70 years and immuno-suppressed with a kidney transplant of 37 years.) But come evening, I let myself out of the enclosure of house to ride endless circles along my secluded street, savoring breeze that brushes my face and stealing peace in the darkening shades of dusk.

But it wasn’t two of us for very long. (Well, actually three. Picchu the poodle-Maltese mix rides in the basket behind me.) I would randomly invite kids I’d pass along the way, some I knew, with others we made introduction. “Hey, come and ride with us!” Stones may gather no ‘moss’ but we surely do. Out of pandemic seclusion kids of all ages partake of new friendships and silliness in the relative freedom of outside play.

Interestingly, we enjoy the sidebar of company that sits in front-lawn chairs sipping wine and chatting with us as we pedal round. There’s a two-foot high ramp that challenges many of the kids, and I’ve even been cajoled into going over it three-wheeled. My front wheel hits dead center, and I close my eyes and squeal.

Neighbor Kim has a large swing hanging from a tree branch in her yard. The kids always spend time there, or race across the street where Meghan's dad, Jimmy, expects to be tagged. He snatches Tagger's bike and hangs it by rope and pulley to a bar that meets a power pole.

There is more than riding that transpires during our wheeled adventures. Kids round the circle know each other now. Genevie's parents mention their satisfaction that their daughter has finally made friends in the neighborhood. I asked Elizabeth why it was that she had never made a neighborhood buddy. "Cause we're all inside on our machines!" she said, matter-of-factly.

Amber (a darling 13-year old) has a lot of power in the group. Her influence shouts like a neon sign! The two of us generally start the ride, stopping at one house and the next, ringing bike bells, and hollering made-up names. "You ridin' tonight, Sir Anthony? Get out here, Devil Bugar! Kokopelli, we're waiting for you! Casserole! Purple Peril! Froggie! Hey, Paco!"

I somehow feel responsible to keep tabs on the safety of younger riders, and also quell fusses that rarely occur with the older ones. These kids are so familiar with each other now that they feel free to argue like siblings. The mother and teacher in me spill into the mix and I become problem solver, peacemaker, and encourager. We are practicing reverence for the opinions and feelings of each other.

Four adults ride three-wheelers and it has renewed friendships of days gone by, our own children grown and gone from the neighborhood. Another child, age 14, lives with Cerebral Palsy and rides a metal bike-like gizmo with sidecar. He loves the audience of a dozen or more kids and adults riding nearby, each gracefully accepting of his somewhat awkward movements and happy chatter.

The pandemic has altered the way things were. We're a spoiled society, and like fussy siblings, don't like to be told we can't do something. But out of these proverbial 'ashes' has come an alliance of neighborhood folk dedicated to unexpected camaraderie.

"Caring for special needs kids is a full time job," says Paco's mother, Kathy. "Getting out on our bikes with this crazy cluster gives me a break."

Meghan's father speaks of the relief he feels that his daughter is getting out for exercise and companionship, but that the rides have turned into so much more—singing, making up of fantastic stories with vampires and queens, a thousand expressions of unabashed glee.

Our unlikely alliance has become a *most* likely, anticipated, gladsome, nightly frolic!

