

Traveling Companion: The long distance biker

Fr. Michael Tracey

It is 4 a.m. and I am heading out the door for my usual morning 10 mile bike ride. As I mount my bike on the roadside, I make sure the neighbor's dogs don't give me an awakening send-off.

As I peddle down St. Charles St., the FEMA trailers salute me from either side. I listen to the whine of the air-conditioning as it cools the bodies of the slumber-land inhabitants. I cycle through the sparsely lit street, conscious of the darkness, both physical and emotions that still reside in our community. My meager bike lamp keeps a dim ray of hope alive within me as it dances along.

There is that dog again, barking, as I cross the railroad tracks. I peddle fast so he can lose my scent. As I bike along, I glance at the changing landscape. Internally, my own landscape has changed.

I negotiate the pile of sand at the end of the street and the beach and begin to head west into a stiff morning breeze. Previously, I have ridden on the bike trail along the beach. But I have learned. No longer do I care to do battle with its sand vomits, its broken bridges, its lonely three branches, its smashed glass bottles and its uncertain future. Instead, I ride on the roadway. I have learned, as we all have, to continue to adjust; to allow the past to pass and still teach us.

As I ride along, piles of debris, remnants of foundations and abandoned trucks shield me from what used to be pristine home settings with their well manicured lawns. Now, a few trailers stand as lonely sentries

I notice the new, yet simple streets signs that direct the stranger to final destinations. I remember meeting the group from Phoenix, Arizona who made the signs to direct the lost souls who continue to come and help.

The Beach road is another story. My early morning rides has taught me well. Now, I can anticipate where the bumps and bruises, the potholes and washed out places; the spewing broken water pipe and wind-blown sand are along the way waiting, lurking for me. Experience counts and I make adjustments.

As I peddle on, some barking dogs break the silence as they sniff out an intruder who is passing by. Soon, they quiet down, realizing that I am no treat to their territory or masters. Every morning, I can prepare myself mentally for their defensive stance as I can anticipate where they might greet me with a howl.

There are no cars or trucks to pass me by. If they ever do, I am clad in my orange, mesh safety vest. After all, I do not wish to become a statistic. In one sense, I feel so alone in the semi-darkness and yet, I feel surrounded by freedom; freedom from noise, busyness, schedules, appointments. Most of all, I am able to embrace the freedom to be in and enjoy my own thoughts and feelings.

Oh! Yes! I am wiser now. I have learned from the bumps and bruises on the road ahead. Now, I can anticipate and prepare. I have been here before, even though that "here" seems to constantly change.

I, finally, turn for home again; driven a little faster by the tail breeze. Home! The word generates its own turmoil. As I ride past the broken dreams and promises of people, I know they, too, struggle with the idea of home. Now, it is more temporary than lasting; more confusing than reassuring; more uncertain than comforting; more distant than realized and more passing than stable.

Finally, I turn in the driveway. Now, I am home, wherever that may be.

