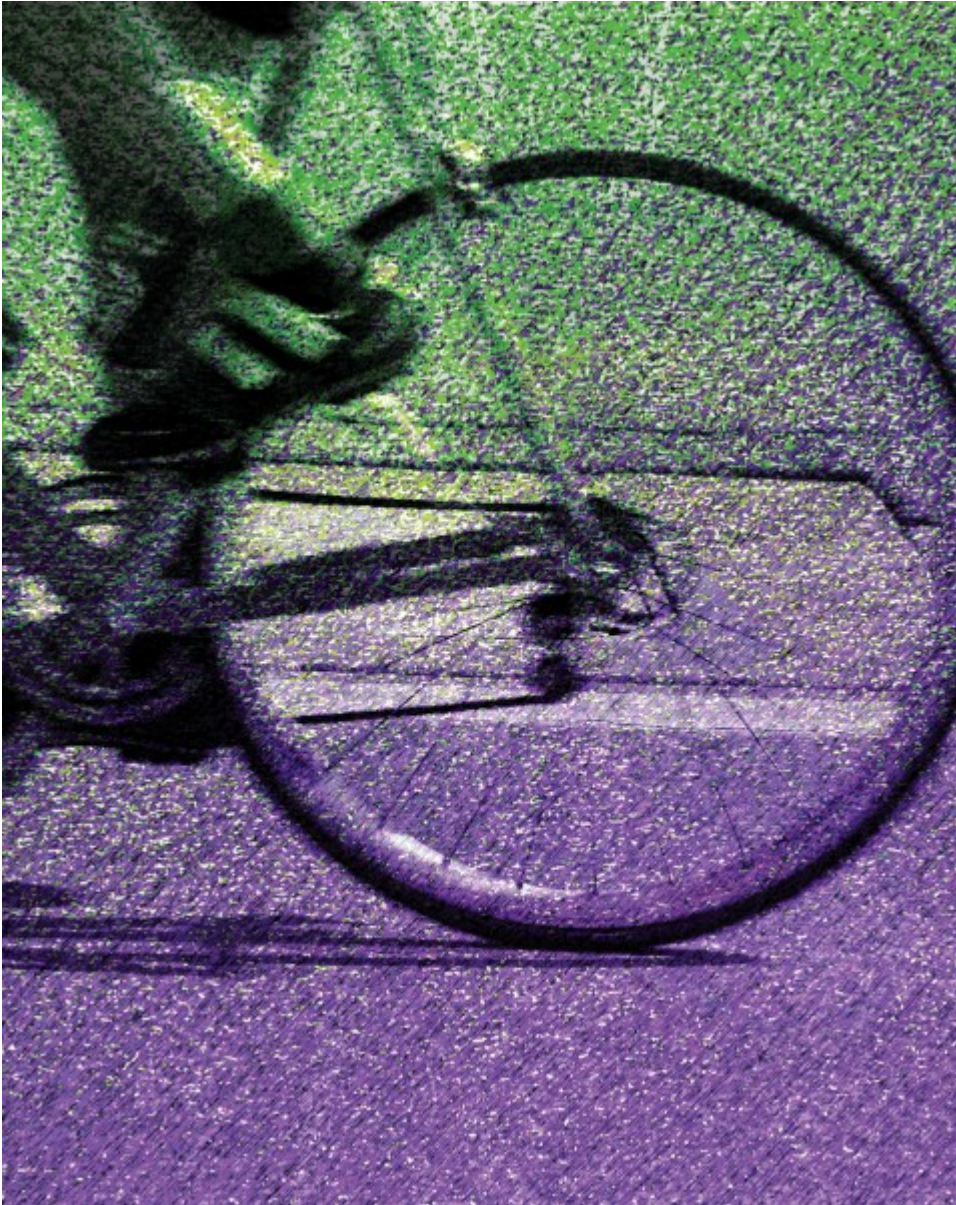


Cycling my way to peace

Turning the pedals over again and again, I began to feel the fullness of who I am and how I was made.

by [Brian Bantum](#) in the [August 2024](#) issue

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(Century illustration)

For a long time I have ended most of my emails with “Peace.” Amid violence and protest this closing has become something of a prayer for each of my students and colleagues. A prayer for peace, an invitation to peace.

Since I began this practice, I think it is fair to say my prayer has yet to be realized. In recent years I have found myself wondering what peace even looks like. What is this peace I sign off with?

Theological tomes did not help me realize what peace could be, and neither did long walks in the woods. It was cycling. In a world that felt stretched and fragmenting, I would go out for a ride and the air would feel different. I started riding without music in my ear, just listening to the crank pull the chain and the wheels run along the pavement and the click of the gears up and down, down and up, all with the wind whooshing in my ears.

Out on a ride, it all whirred together: need, limit, movement, struggle, power, skill, joy, attentiveness, danger. I became aware of every sound, every breath, every crack that chunked under my tire. But most of all I felt like myself. I can't really explain it any other way. I felt the fibers of my muscles and the air leaving me. I felt the machine's vibrations, it a part of me and I of it. And something about moving like that in the world, turning those pedals over again and again, made me feel it: peace.

Yes, it's the serotonin or the endorphins—I don't know which is which—but that's part of my point. My mind is a part of my body, my body entwined with my mind, my soul woven within the two. And something about those moments on the bike wove them all back together in me. I could feel the braids that join me to the world I'm moving in. So much so that I craved the peace I felt on the bike in other parts of my life. I did not want to wrestle with myself anymore—I knew there was something different, a whole life out there for me.

It wasn't a life of ease that I needed. The peace I found on my bike was not the alleviation of effort or even suffering. On my bike there was a peace on the climbs that burned my lungs and on descents where I felt like I was flying. With each successive ride I got stronger, until—on days when asthma flared or smoke filled the skies or I got sick—suddenly I wasn't as strong as I thought. But I still rode, and I realized that my strength would wane and rise but peace was possible amid it all. In such moments I feel the fullness of who I am and how I was made—of living with those things and not against them.

This was a beginning: the moment when I realized I needed to go to therapy, where I would come to understand that my anxiety was a bodily reality, a kind of myopia. That the way I was processing the world was as much a part of the way my body was wired as it was an inability to cope. That the anxiety came from trying to constantly fit myself into this world in ways that worked against how I was made.

With some language to be able to describe what was happening to me, I could also begin to see how I had been trying to wring peace into being in my life. And the more I tried to beat peace into place or squeeze it out of my life, the farther it fell from me.

When I stopped trying and started to listen to my life—to listen to my body, as though I were riding down the Burke-Gilman Trail—I encountered moments of peace that were inviting me to swim, to move with, to no longer hide my body from myself or from God, bending behind bushes just wanting to not be seen. And when you stop and you hear those first few notes that ring within you—and its not just what you ate or thought but also who you ate with and how it sated that craving you didn't know you had—that's spirit, that's peace.

Since I've begun to taste a bit of this peace in my life, I can't seem to read Jesus' life in quite the same way. In the face of empire and poverty and the abuse of power, his ministry was the presence of peace. In small moments of encounter that allowed people to see themselves for who they were, Jesus invited them to shalom, a oneness, a completeness, a life in which all the parts are joined and moving and bending and pushing and pulling as one. Yes, there will be strain and struggle. There will be moments when you aren't as strong as you were before. There will also be joy, freedom, the warmth of a hand holding yours, the smell of warm rice, the clatter of bowls.

And there is something revolutionary about this kind of peace, especially when we work to make it possible for those in our midst. Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he prayed in the garden, "That they would be in me as I am in you."

But I wouldn't have known what to fight for without those long rides on two wheels. What's the peace you'll find, or that you hope for for your neighbor?