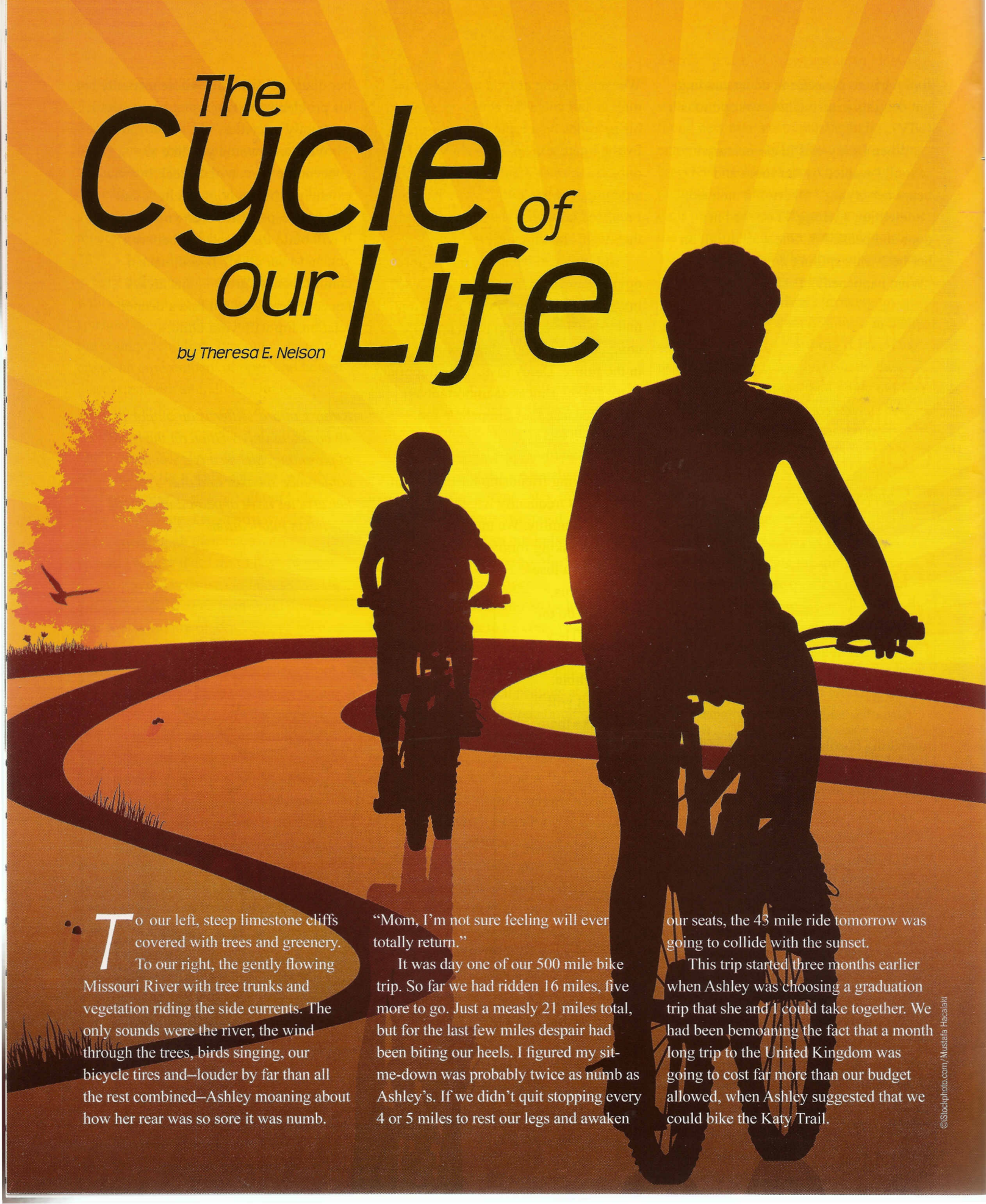


The Cycle of our Life

by Theresa E. Nelson

The background of the page is a vibrant sunset with a bright yellow sun low on the horizon, creating a silhouette effect. In the foreground, a woman and a young child are riding bicycles away from the viewer on a winding path. The woman is on the right, and the child is on the left. To the left of the path, there are silhouettes of trees and a bird in flight. The overall mood is peaceful and reflective.

To our left, steep limestone cliffs covered with trees and greenery. To our right, the gently flowing Missouri River with tree trunks and vegetation riding the side currents. The only sounds were the river, the wind through the trees, birds singing, our bicycle tires and—louder by far than all the rest combined—Ashley moaning about how her rear was so sore it was numb.

“Mom, I’m not sure feeling will ever totally return.”

It was day one of our 500 mile bike trip. So far we had ridden 16 miles, five more to go. Just a measly 21 miles total, but for the last few miles despair had been biting our heels. I figured my sit-me-down was probably twice as numb as Ashley’s. If we didn’t quit stopping every 4 or 5 miles to rest our legs and awaken

our seats, the 43 mile ride tomorrow was going to collide with the sunset.

This trip started three months earlier when Ashley was choosing a graduation trip that she and I could take together. We had been bemoaning the fact that a month long trip to the United Kingdom was going to cost far more than our budget allowed, when Ashley suggested that we could bike the Katy Trail.

The Katy Trail is built on the former corridor of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad and runs across the middle of Missouri, east to west. Its crushed limestone surface winds through grassy prairie, between primordial swamps, alongside the Missouri River, past spreading farms, skirts tall bluffs, rolls through woods, and through little towns that thrived when the train was running. At 225 miles, it is the longest and skinniest state park in Missouri and the longest rail-trail in the United States. People come from all over to ride the Katy.

"Mom," Ashley said, touching my arm for emphasis, "if we can't go to Europe, we need to do something no one else we know has done. Like bike the Katy both ways. How many people can say they biked the whole trail twice?"

She did have a point. A small percentage of the population had biked the Katy once (no one we knew), but both ways, now that would certainly reduce the statistics.

We were sold. We did our research by book and web, plotted the miles, decided our evening stops, and booked our accommodations at bed and breakfasts. We dropped our bikes off for tune-ups, made Rubbermaid panniers from a web site, packed our clothes, and waited for the end of May to arrive. Life whisked by so quickly we never logged any training miles. But, how hard could it be to pedal 40 or 50 miles a day?

Apparently for our rears, which were not used to balancing on a small, inflexible, ax-shaped bike seat, it was harder than we thought. Forget our legs—they were singing a peppy tune—it was our sit-me-downs that were feeling the pain.

After another stop to revive our numb extremity, we checked into our bed and breakfast. We explored the sleepy little town of 108, mailed a postcard home to

the boys, and waited for the one establishment serving dinner to open.

The next morning at breakfast, with a gentleman who had been pedaling since Colorado Springs, and a couple who were on a two day bike trip, we learned that bike shorts did help combat seat pain. However, short of a healthy dose of anesthesia, one just learned to live with it.

As Ashley and I munched our muffins and hardboiled eggs, the conversation turned to us. We explained that we were starting the second day of our two week trek on the Katy and had the distinct feeling that our experienced cycling companions were snickering and laying bets on whether we would make it to our evening destination, much less the end of the trail. There we were dressed in lightweight exercise pants and long sleeve shirts with stained tennis shoes. We had bikes that probably weighed close to two of their bikes, homemade Rubbermaid panniers, and off the rack bike helmets. No black padded shorts or front zippered cycling jerseys, stiff bike shoes, sleek fenderless bikes, or cloth panniers.

Besides the lactic acid screaming for an initial few minutes, day two proceeded just fine. Our legs and rears were remarkably not sore. We fell into a stride and were able to ride much further without stopping to rest. We began noticing the scenery, animals, and the small towns (populations often 200-600). Much to our amazement, we arrived at our next bed and breakfast by 4:30pm. "Who is laughing now?" Ashley asked. We felt proud of our accomplishment. "No doubt that we'll make it the whole way," I said.

And make it we did. Not only did our legs get stronger and our rears tougher,



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but as the miles passed we became pros. We began dispensing advice to the novice riders we met. "The hills stop in another twenty miles," we'd encourage, smiling benevolently. "Stock up on water after North Jefferson because the depots don't have water," we'd say. People began asking us questions because we'd ridden where they were heading.

We learned to ride in the rain and wring water out of our socks; ride up hill for ten miles without stopping to rest; spit bugs out of our mouth; sing and ride; take a ten minute nap on a wooden bench; wear the same cycling clothes for three days straight; dodge squirrels and woodchucks; manage with very little; laugh, rest, relax, and have fun; spend hours together without the need to fill the silence; and just enjoy each other's company. We were amazed at how beautiful Missouri is. We learned to encourage each other and discovered the importance of prayer. We learned we were stronger than we thought. We learned we could live without I-pods, computers, cell phones (except one call home a day), and got excited about seeing bluebirds, black snakes thicker than my arm, watching the river, a good breeze and shade, and a grocery store with fresh fruit. In short, we thoroughly enjoyed the trip, grew closer, and reveled in God's creation and daily providence.

The best part was spending two weeks of uninterrupted time with Ashley. Interruptions, daily life, commitments,



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activities often keep us apart. Now we were together "24/7" sharing in a common goal. Where to stop for lunch, would it rain tomorrow, how long would the next ten miles take, and who got the first shower were life's most pressing questions. Not only did life slow down and become less complicated, the to-do list was drastically shortened—pick up some food and cycle to the next town.

Bikers in their sleek cycling clothes and expensive bikes zoomed past us, probably thinking we were hicks and laughing at us. But frankly, we didn't care because we were laughing at them. We were relaxing, having fun, and enjoying the scenery and ourselves. I bet none of them burst into song for an hour as the scenery past; took an hour and a half eating lunch to talk to the locals and bikers; or stopped just to watch the river, study a meadow, or gaze at a woodchuck waddle into the woods. Probably not many sat near an old cemetery listening to a brook and spitting cherry seeds upon the ground.

One of our most empowering parts of the trip happened on day 13. After riding over three hours in rain, we met up with a father/son team we had met the day before. We chatted for a few minutes and discovered they had been waiting the rain out and were just starting out now that it was noon and it had stopped raining. "You stayed in town then?" I asked. "Yes. Didn't you stay in town too?"

and

leaning casually on her bike handles. "Nothing like a little ride in the rain to make one hungry for lunch."

We rode away and a block later collapsed in laughter. Two dripping wet, non-professional, Rubbermaid packing girls had just shown them up.

Life can be impossibly busy, which makes connecting with a teen harder than pedaling uphill with only one leg. But don't let Ashley and I have all the fun. Grab your teen this next school break and spend some forced, uninterrupted time together doing an activity neither one of you is good at. Dust off the hiking boots and refold the tent back into its impossibly compact holder and take that 20 mile hike in the mountains. Sign up for a water color class. Dust off your bicycles and plan a trip. Strap the canoe to the car and head off to the wilderness. Peruse

they questioned. Ashley and I smiled at each other and then at them. "No, we stayed in Sedalia 25 miles back," I cooed.

Their mouths gapped open and their eyes widened more than necessary for the clouded light. Silently they studied us again. "That's right," Ashley added,

guidebooks and go to Europe with your backpack and youth hostel reservations. Reserve a cabin on the lake and fly fish. Enroll in that mother-son dance class hosted by the parks and recreation. Head to the mountains for a ski trip. Drive across Wyoming and count cars and antelope. The point is to do something different together. Detox from everyday life and focus on each other and the activity. Learn and grow together. Fail and succeed. In short, embrace life and each other. Make memories before you both go your separate ways.

Would we do it again? In a heart-beat. We plan to bike the Eire Canal Trail System. Only this time we're thinking about investing in padded bike shorts.

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