

Cycling for a Higher Purpose

Brian McNeece

He called and asked in his measured English if I could put him up for the night. Just as I had for dozens of other cross-country cyclists, I said yes. The next night he rolled up, heavily loaded, on his white and blue bike with “Travel for Aid” blazoned all over it.

Matteo turned out to have quite a story. He grew up in a small town in southern Italy, son of two teachers. He took a degree in political science in Italy and then earned a masters in European history in England and France.

Working for the European Union, he rose fast by writing an influential paper. “I was making as much money as some government ministers, especially since I didn’t have to pay taxes. All of my colleagues were buying villas in the suburbs and driving nice cars.”

Matteo preferred to live among the color, noise, and bustle with the immigrants and working class just a couple of miles from his job. He commuted by bike.

“After six years, I decided to quit. It just wasn’t for me. I moved to Egypt and was living on 20% of my salary. Then I began my cycling odyssey. I rode across the Mideast to Southeast Asia—Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The Asians were upset at my answer to the question, ‘Why do you travel on your bicycle?’ It was not enough to love to see new places and meet new people. ‘You must have a higher purpose.’ I thought they were right, so I decided to raise awareness of disabled children. That’s my purpose.”

To pick up some extra cash in Taiwan, he became the foster father to two 8 year-old Chinese boys. Every day he put one boy on the top tube of the bike, and one on the rack in back and pedaled them to school. For six months he was dad, mom, cook, chauffeur, and nurse to these orphans. From time to time, he stopped at a bike shop for repairs. One day, when he rolled up he saw two new children’s bikes. “The shop owner told all his friends about me, and they pitched in to buy the boys bikes. From then on, we rode together to and from school.”

Matteo looked a little like Gene Wilder, his blonde hair unruly under his cap, his eyes mischievous but gentle. “I’ll never live in Europe again,” he told me.



"I'm happy living in Cambodia, where people meet real needs with grace and dignity. In Europe people are chasing needs that aren't real. That's the downside of prosperity."



Matteo had pedaled here from Alaska. He asked if it was safe to ride a bike through Mexico. "Ever since I landed in Alaska, people told me not to go. 'It's a totally violent country. You'll get run over, kidnapped. Bodies are hanging from bridges. You could get decapitated.'"

"No one's going to kidnap you. You don't have any money. But most roads in Mexico don't have shoulders, and drivers are not respectful of cyclists. Traffic is wild."

"Heavy traffic doesn't bother me. I've pedaled roads in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh."

"In that case, go. We enjoy Baja California all the time. Go."

I called a hotel in Mexicali for him, and he was off. In a few days, I started feeling a little guilty, a little responsible. So I called him. He answered, "Brian? Oh yeah, Brian. I want to thank you a million times for encouraging me to come to Mexico."

He'd already been invited to meals, a boat ride, a tour of a farm, and was ready to zig zag across northern Mexico, bound for Veracruz and then Cuba. I wished him well.

For some reason, I was thinking of Matteo and his noble purpose. I looked in our guest book to see if he had left his contact info, but he had left no number. Only, "Ciao, Brian. Thanks for your hospitality and interesting conversation. October 10, 2013."

I typed his name into Google, and the headline said, "*Addio a Matteo Tricarico, il globetrotter in bici che girava il mondo per i disabilitato.*"

"Farewell to Matteo Tricarico, the cycling globetrotter that toured the world for the disabled."



What a sad surprise. Matteo survived Mexico and Cuba and 45,000 miles of pedaling around the world. But he couldn't survive cancer. He had died in October of 2015 after a short illness.

Suddenly, I felt a strange loss, that the world was missing some key force for good and love. I had spent just a few hours talking with Matteo, but as I read the many tributes to him on his Facebook page, I could sense how many people he had touched along his path.