

Between the rivers

Bike ride from Herndon to Purcellville
(the rivers are Potomac and Shenandoah)

5/1/09

After the academic year ended in the beginning of May I decided to take a break from normal activities for a week. It had been a long year and I was feeling mentally, physically and emotionally drained. Pushing myself to the limits had caused adrenaline fatigue and weakened the immune system. Too much time spent indoors or in the city without enough exercise only added to the problem. So I decided to get out of the city, get some rest, fresh air and spend a lot of time outdoors just wandering around doing nothing. I spent a week spent in the refuge of nature. Here is the story of the beginning of the week until I reached the mountains. I meant to write the whole week's story but never finished it.

Sankar

P.S: Pictures from the trip are at <http://flickr.com/sankarx> (Click on Blue ridge album). The numbers in parentheses refer to the corresponding photos on flickr.

5/1. Friday evening

Finished submitting final grades and other departmental activities. Only one more thing to go and that was the first ever picnic for the "nature lovers' meetup" group that was scheduled for saturday. I wanted to do my best to make this one go well. Meetup groups are loosely organized internet based social networks. I have been one of the looser organizers, so there wasn't a real mass of people who did things together. People picked events that appealed to them and attended whenever they could. It was more like a train station. People come and go and you don't know most of them. Apart from my fellow organizers (and ardent nature enthusiasts Scott and Lori) there were very few people whom I could call regulars. So this would be the very first event that you could call a community builder. We had been planning and preparing for several weeks now, and that day was just hours away. Based on a member survey we had opted for an outdoor event and I had booked a picnic grove in Rock Creek Park. I had been looking at the weather anxiously for the past week and more. This being DC the forecast changed every few hours. This morning the forecast was back to 40%, showers being more likely

in the afternoon. So I sent an email on the mailing list saying we are going ahead as planned. But now they were saying showers likely in the morning as well. Well, well, well. No point in worrying about what you cannot control. I would do my best, leave the rest to providence.

Lori had agreed to pick up the plant that was donated to us by the garden store "Garden District." I just had to pick up some basics, like biodegradable plates, cups, water etc., from Whole Foods as well as some potatoes for the big bowl of soup I was planning to cook. By the time I got there I realized that between the time the picnic ended and the time I was planning to leave for the Blue Ridge mountains there might not be much time to shop for the trip essentials. So I also picked up some soup cans, protein bars, trail mix etc. When I got home it was past 10pm. By the time I packed some things for the picnic it was 11pm. I had absolutely no energy left. Had been running on adrenaline for a couple of weeks now, and the brain was beginning to fade. Much as I wanted to cook the soup, I realized it was better to conserve energy and prioritize my time. Since I had to leave by 8.45 in the morning I decided to go to bed and cook in the morning if there was time. But try as I could I could not sleep. Some kids were having a party in the alley behind the house and were pumping very loud music that literally shook the walls. Finally I gave up and tried to sleep in the living room where the sound wasn't so intense. By the time I fell asleep it must have been past 2 a.m.

5/2 Saturday morning,

Got up at 7 am and had just enough time to mix the rice that I had put in the cooker last night with some spinach and chickpeas to make a very simple dish. Managed to pack everything in my backpack and couple of grocery bags for the trip to the picnic spot. It was still dry when I got out and started walking to the bus stop in the quiet morning. So far so good.

It was 9.45 am when the S4 bus dropped me at 16th and Aspen. I walked down Sherrill drive that winds its way inside Rock Creek Park. The suddenly lush and green forest overwhelmed me, sending a great rush of joy coursing through the veins. The last time I was in Rock Creek Park it was still mostly bare. It is amazing how nature energizes the mind and spirit.

I was pleasantly surprised to see two people already there. I was fully expecting to spend an hour there setting up the tables and then waiting for someone to show up. Nancy and Jyotsna were not only there, they had also set up the tables and upon finding that there was no grill in that grove promptly took off to buy a grill from the nearest Home Depot! When you leave things to God your prayers are usually answered :-)

People started trickling in around 11am. It rained a bit hard for about 5 minutes. We took shelter under the two umbrellas that I had brought. But after that it stayed dry throughout the day and the whole thing turned out rather wonderfully. A good number of people showed up, we had a good time, there was a lot of good food and three of us even went for a little hike afterwards. [Pictures from the picnic are at <http://www.meetup.com/nature-lovers/photos/#8449579>]. One of the hikers dropped me off at home around 4pm.

5/2 Saturday night

After crashing for a little nap I went out for a couple of hours. I wrote my activities log (can't really say I keep a diary) for the week while watching an exciting NBA game between Boston and Chicago. Around me guys were pontificating expertly on the game while their pretty nubile women friends were chattering away. I also enjoyed watching the rather charismatic bartender mix the drinks dexterously as if he were giving a performance. Not that I haven't seen bartenders before but this guy was particularly adept and full of good cheer. It struck me that the cocktail bar was really just a chemistry (both the material and emotional kind) lab. The odor of the spirits and mixers was quite strong.

5/3 Sunday morning

Woke up around 8.30 with absolutely no energy. It was also raining steadily. I was planning to go to church (Universalist memorial) but dropped that idea. It was a bit hard to make that decision because I hate changing plans or breaking commitments (I had told a friend I might be there). Basically it is very hard for me to quit on anything. But this morning it was probably the right thing to do. Sometimes you have to listen to your body.

I also gave up on readying the road bike that hadn't been ridden for several months. Would just have to make the trip on my heavier

mountain bike. The plan was to take the bus to Herndon and bike the remaining 35 or so miles to the Blue ridge mountains, stay at Bear's den trail center for five days, do some hiking and then bike back. I packed very light - just one change of clothes, hiking boots and a bike map in addition to the soup cans etc., No books or notes of any kind except for one small notepad to jot down notes. That was also a hard decision :-). Managed to pack everything into my backpack and a small lunch bag that could be hung on a handlebar. The hiking boots I hung on the other handlebar (photo #90). I also picked up a spare tube, lights etc., for the bike.

Made some mung bean and rice pancakes (adai) and set out at noon. The 5A bus to Dulles airport (via Herndon) would leave from L'Enfant Plaza at 2.35. I had to get a compact pump and check the brakes for the bike. It was raining somewhat hard. So I put on my raincoat and started riding to City Bikes. The mechanic there was kind enough to accommodate my last minute request. I apologized for doing this at the last minute.

While I was waiting for my brake pads to be replaced a really nice and pretty woman customer was checking out a new bike. I felt envious of the sales guy who was fortunate enough to chat with her for a long time and also help her check that the bike was well suited for her height and body type. I wish I were a bike salesman! But she did flash a nice smile at me as she passed by. A beautiful smile especially one with a hint of recognition can make your day. Or even your week or month. By the time I got the brakes fixed, bought a pump and left the bike shop it was almost 2pm.

It rained all the way to the 5A bus stop at L'Enfant plaza and rained while we were waiting for the bus as well. There were several people waiting with their luggage. The bus got crammed with people pretty good by the time we got out of Rosslyn. It was nice to hear conversations in many languages, though. One Italian couple in particular was carrying on in typically animated fashion.

Got off at the Herndon-Monroe Park-and-Ride lot at close to 4pm. Started biking right away. I had about four and a half hours to make the hostel, about 35 miles away. That shouldn't normally be a problem except that it was a rainy day and that there were bound to be some hilly sections closer to the hostel. I hadn't had time to look at the map to really calculate the time needed but I knew it was mostly flat until

Purcellville which was about 25 miles away. Also I didn't know how fast I could go on this bike with the luggage and all. One also needed to leave a cushion for unforeseen accidents, such as a flat tire.

Luckily it didn't rain until I passed Purcellville. I was able to go at a steady 12 mph speed on the average, which was quite satisfactory considering the circumstances. From the parking lot I passed through Herndon town to the W&OD (Washington & Old Dominion) trail. Herndon town seemed to be getting bigger each time I see it. A lot of Hispanics seemed to have moved into the town, either for work or to live. The Mexican fast food places were tempting but I had to keep moving. There is a little railroad museum where the trail intersects the town.

The W&OD is very pleasant to bike on. It is mostly flat, due to the fact that it is paved over what used to be an old railroad track going from Arlington to Purcellville at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Because it is a railroad track the grade changes and curves are all very gradual. Often you can see that the roads running alongside it are undulating and winding while the bike path itself is level and straight.

In the middle of the last century many wealthy Washingtonians built summer homes along the Blue Ridge and the railroad was a convenient way to get to Washington. One of those was Dr. Hugh Lawson who built the mansion that is Bear's den hostel today. Apparently at the same time many of the Appalachian folks who were living on the mountain were displaced, causing much pain and suffering. So much so that they say the Blue Ridge is blue because of all that tragedy. It is a fact of life in America that all this magnificent material progress was made at the expense of much blood, sweat and tears - of the Native Americans, African-Americans and poor whites such as those that live in Appalachia. But one cannot enjoy life for two seconds if one were to dwell on all the misery that exists on this planet. Unless you are like Gandhi or Mother Teresa living the life of the poorest and in service to them.

So let me continue to tell you about all the beautiful and pleasant things I enjoyed on this trip. On the W&OD it was not that crowded, being a rainy Sunday afternoon. Most of the time my company consisted of the dense shrubs and trees on both sides of the trail (the bike path and the land on both sides is officially designated as a regional park of Virginia). Many cardinals, starlings, goldfinches, rabbits and a surprising number of groundhogs. At one point (on the return trip, actually) a black rat

snake (photo #102) slithered across the trail. The trail ran through suburbs, for the most part. Peaceful backyards, golf courses, parks, playgrounds and such.

The mind was still restless from the city life and all the activity of the past several days and more. If you are a woman and you are wondering whether it is true that men think about sex all the time, I assure you it is true. Left to wander the mind kept going back to all the women I had met in the past several weeks, months and years. When you keep yourself busy and focus only on the task at hand those thoughts stay in the background, but once you start idling they come to the foreground. After a few hours of biking I got into a rhythm, the mind slowed and calmed down and I started to really enjoy the scenery and live in the moment. Unfortunately that is also when fatigue started to take over and I just wanted to get to the destination.

5/3 Sunday evening

Reached the intersection of W&OD with Dry Mill Road (mile 38 on the W&OD) at 6pm. About 22 miles in less than 2 hours. By now I was in the country side. At this intersection I sat down on a bench and devoured part of the big quiche that was leftover from the picnic (Thanks to whoever brought it!) while enjoying the scene of donkeys and horses grazing in the nearby farm (photos 1,2,3). Left around 6.30. Soon I was in Purcellville town and it started drizzling. Purcellville is the last stop on the railroad and they have preserved the old railway station. (I think the same is true of Leesburg which is a much bigger town – more on Leesburg later).

Purcellville is at the foothills of the mountains. Once I got out of the town and passed Round hill (all on route 7 business route) the mountain appeared. The road itself was not all that steep, though it starts climbing. It was a great sight to see those mountains after a long time. I couldn't resist taking a picture from the shoulder (photo 4), though it was a bit tricky to do so, with the traffic whizzing past at over 60 mph. The last couple of miles to the hostel were punishing. In spite of being on the lowest gear I could only go slowly. By now it was getting darker and also raining more steadily. Luckily at the point where the road gets steeper and tortuous the shoulder also gets much wider.

Finally by 8pm I got to the intersection with Blue Ridge Mountain road. My body was completely spent and I had to will myself to climb the

remaining 500 feet or so to the hostel. At one point I swerved to make way for a car and biked into the roadside ditch. It wasn't bad but after that I simply walked the rest of the way to the hostel. I had reached the limits of my body and mind. Felt like I had been running a marathon for several days. It was a great relief to walk to the hostel door.