

Life, Death, and Other Such Matters

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – September 30, 2012

I'm glad to be home, in my office, typing on a real computer – not fumbling around on a tablet in the dark, late at night, in a far away B&B. But, in many ways, I'm still not back from my Pittsburgh to DC bike ride. I'm happy to be with family and friends, sleeping in my own bed, eating what and where I want. But, other aspects of reentry since arriving home Monday morning have been less easy to handle.

For example, deciding what to write has been difficult. There are plenty of options – many inspired by time spent in our nation's capital before and after the bike ride. But, I can't bring myself just yet to jump back into the political fray.

Isolation from current events was one of many nice byproducts of a week spent pedaling in seclusion through wildness and backwoods towns. For six days on the Great Allegheny Passage and C&O Towpath trails, eight hours daily were spent just getting from point A to point B. Days were about self-propelled travel sprinkled with refueling and rolling sightseeing. Evenings were dedicated to showers, beverages, food, and sleep – in that order, as quickly as possible. Half the places we stayed didn't have TVs. In those that did, sleepy eyes took in little of what came across the screen before I drifted away.

I kept friends updated on our travels via Facebook, so I tripped over snippets of news and politics on my smart phone. But, nothing could stick for long; I had too much else going on to be concerned with events so far away and not relevant to the task at hand.

Maybe that's part of the problem. Perhaps we have too much time to worry, fret, and grow angry over events of the day? It's a fine line, for certain, as the lack of all caring or concern is a sure recipe for things to run amok. But, the trick seems to be caring without caring so much that we confuse events that feel like life and death with that which truly is life and death.

I had that strong feeling last Friday, standing on the sacred grounds of Antietam National Battlefield near Sharpsburg, MD. Site of the bloodiest single day of fighting in US history, the corn fields, pastures, and hillsides around Antietam Creek were soaked on September 17, 1862 with the blood of 23,000 confederate and union soldiers who were killed, wounded, or missing in action by day's end. Standing amid a staggering number of monuments to the dead, looking down upon the Sunken Road that would be known ever after as Bloody Lane, and viewing the famous photographs by Alexander Gardner, I was confronted with echoes of a carnage my mind can thankfully never fathom.

Filled with sober awe for an historic event too tragic and gruesome to ever fully comprehend, I was struck by the silly ways we cloak our politics in dressings of war and deadly conflict. We hear allegations from each side of the presidential contest about “class warfare.” We bemoan the attacks, and the parties feign their wounds. But, this is not warfare. This is not life and death. Go to Antietam if you want to feel the difference.

Thankfully, the trip was mostly about life -- a wonderful kind of life, where every day meant encountering strangers who treated us like friends. Fellow riders, innkeepers, restaurant servers, bike shop mechanics, and townspeople greeted us warmly. Seldom have I felt as accepted and welcome as a cyclist, and we treated our hosts and their towns with the same respect.

It would do us all good to get out more. Step away from that computer; put down your smart phone. Regardless of whether the TV is tuned to Fox News or MSNBC, turn it off for a while. Get outside.

I know a 325-mile bike ride through four states seems impossible for most of you -- and perhaps stupid to some! But, in the end, the experience had very little to do with athletic ability or training and everything to do with a sense of adventure and a small dose of determination. Don't sell yourself short. And, if long distance biking or hiking is not your thing, try a walk on the trail in Oxford, go paddle on the Yellow River, or take a short bike ride on the soon to be finished Eastside Trail in Covington. No matter what you choose, it'll do you more good than you know.