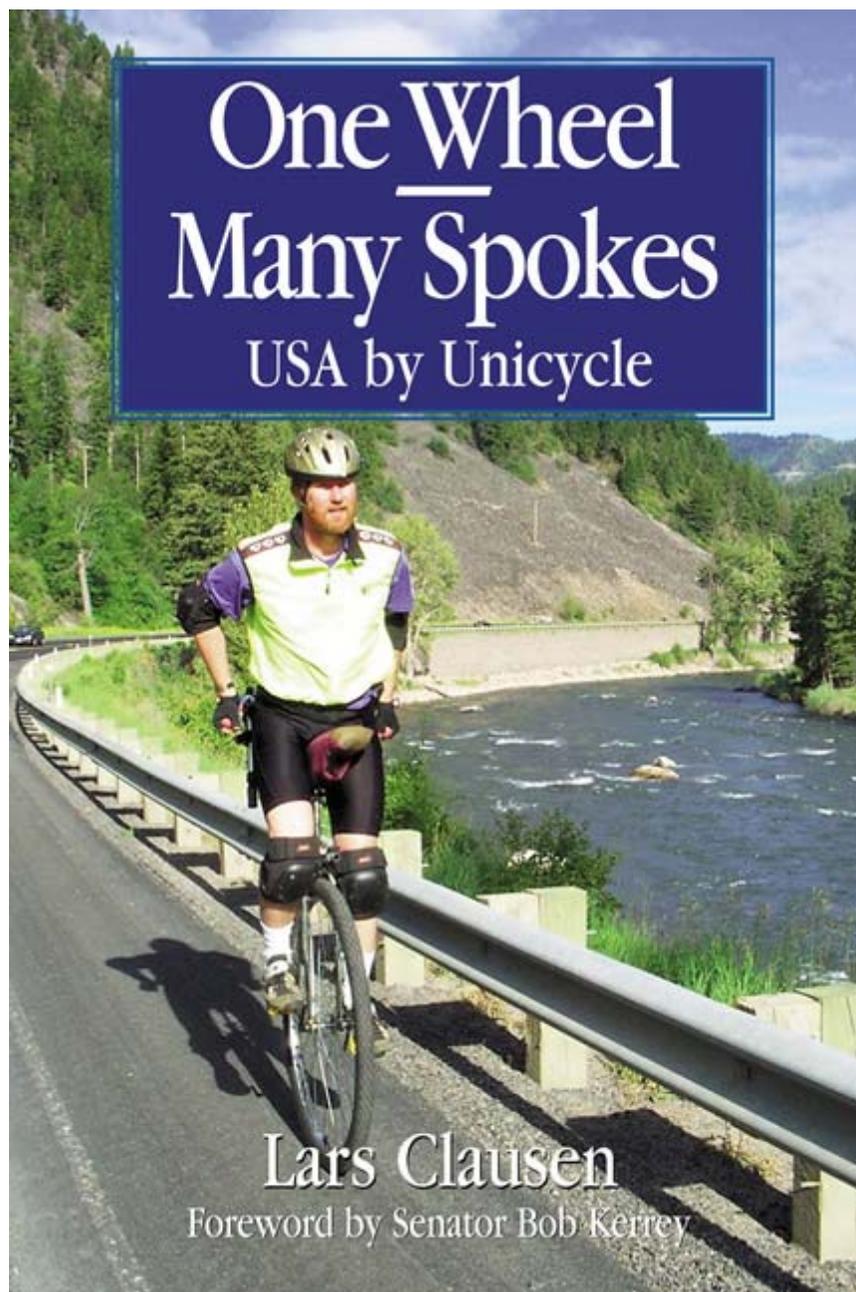


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**One Wheel — Many Spokes:  
USA by Unicycle**

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## Chapter 4

### On The Road

You can't reach old age by another man's road.  
Mark Twain

Crossing the bridge from Astoria into Washington, I begin riding north into my third state. Only one bend north of the Columbia River stands the road sign that marks the westernmost point of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. So much has changed since they arrived here in 1805. Today I travel a wide highway. When they arrived here they were searching for a winter camp that would give them a chance of surviving winter in this wild, unexplored land.

In these first miles of Washington state, Highway 101 winds along bay after bay. I sail along on the unicycle through breathtaking landscapes. Whoever designed 101 liked banked curves, crowned roads, and sloping shoulders—all great for cars traveling at sixty miles per hour. Unfortunately, these features tip unicycles. Other unicyclists have warned me about road crowns and sidewinds. The curves are the trickiest here at the start of the ride, especially curves that climb and turn left at the same time. One of them throws me off balance; I lose momentum and then struggle to keep going. Already I'm thankful for the handlebars and brakes that I have built onto the unicycle, especially the handlebars. With them I have much better stability and control for riding on uneven surfaces, for climbing hills, and for riding against heavy winds.

At lunchtime on this second day I reach Southbend and hear shouting from across the street. The workers at Pacific Seafood are on break, hollering for me to come and visit. It's an oyster plant. The workers are of many nationalities. While we visit I learn about oysters and they ask about unicycles.

"Lots of oysters," says one man who has announced he is from Portugal. The conveyor out back creates a constant clatter as shells spill off its end into a gleaming white pyramid.

"No computer store here," they say, looking surprised when I ask.

"Try Raymond," they offer.

The laptop connection to our cell phone needs one more adapter, which has to be mailed to us. Already dwindling are my hopes of writing every day and e-mailing updates to our five hundred friends and supporters. Computers and unicycles share a kind of digital similarity. On a unicycle you are either balanced or you are not. With the computer you either have all the right connections or you don't. Riding the unicycle is starting out to be easier than reporting on it.

Even after visiting Radio Shack, I'm still stuck for what to do about the computer. I know the updates are probably as important as the unicycling if this trip is to be successful for the Seward Peninsula Lutheran Endowment. But, I reason, I am after all on a unicycle trip. I decide to get out and do some more riding.

I am soon sweating again on this bright afternoon. After a couple of miles I forget the computer frustration and settle into my place on the shoulder of the road, riding up and down through Weyerhaeuser's timberland. In each area signs report the dates of the last cutting, the last replanting and the next projected harvest. Huge stumps still have visible notches, chopped in a bygone day when lumberjacks stood on springboards to hand saw these giants.

Six miles from Aberdeen a short young man steps out on the road, pointing a huge contraption at me. It is intimidating, like being clocked in a speed trap, and as I pass he waves me down.

Holding his gargantuan camera, Kevin Hong introduces himself. "We've been getting calls at the paper all afternoon. One trucker told us he saw you in Seaside yesterday and then again up here today."

Kevin asks if he can drive ahead and get pictures as I ride past. We end up at the office of the Aberdeen Daily Globe for an interview, and then he offers me the opportunity to connect to e-mail.

It's almost dusk by the time I'm finished, but my mileage for the day is 83.5, my highest ever. We head over to the Wal-Mart parking lot to sleep for the night. After the long day today we plan a short ride for tomorrow. We will use the morning for errands; the spare tire on the RV isn't holding air, and we also need a new headlight.

We end up leaving Aberdeen just after noon. I have a slight soreness in my left heel. During the last hour of riding yesterday I felt it tightening up. I will take it easy, thankful that we're headed to Amanda Park today, only forty-four miles up the road. The weather is warm, and the sun is bright.

Three days into this journey I'm still thinking about the ride almost all the time, trying to get adjusted. Some things are becoming routine. I ride. I wave. People wave back. Cars honk.

Dad is also getting into a pattern. He leapfrogs ahead of me in the motor home and I catch him every hour and a half or so. Katie and Luther, our two Siberian huskies, are coming along on this trip, and Dad usually has them leashed outside in the sun when I catch up. At Humptulips he's gotten a copy of the *Daily Globe*, which he hands over. "One Wheel Across America: Pastor Rides for Eskimos," reads the front-page headline above the picture and article. No wonder so many people are honking and cheering today.

While I rest I call Janey McCauley from the Associated Press and tell her how the ride is going on this first week.

"What do you eat?" Janey asks.

"Everything," I answer. "I've got a mix of almonds and chocolate chips along on the unicycle. Usually when I stop at a store I get a quart of chocolate milk."

She quizzes me on my daily mileage, where I sleep, how tired I am, and how my rear end feels. "Can you call me again on Sunday?" she asks, when she's gathered the information.

"Sure, I'll call. We'll be at Neah Bay."

After another ten miles I ride into Olympic National Park. Immediately the trees tower higher above me. Everything I saw earlier this afternoon was managed timber, either second or third growth, much of it clearcut. In one section I had listened to the buzz of chainsaws, watching loggers clearing a hillside. A few miles into the park a sign announces the Quinault Natural Area. Here the trees are old growth, weathered giants, their tops seem to reach the sky. The road is but a tiny corridor through this forest where even motor homes are dwarfed. I feel like a miniature of myself. At the same time, just being in an old growth forest like this brings a sense of fulfillment. It lasts only a few miles, but it's a picture of what all these woods were like a hundred years ago.

Just before Amanda Park I see two kids playing in their yard. The sister is lying on the grass under the trampoline, the brother jumping on top.

"Yuck," hollers the girl.

The boy bounces back to his feet, at the same time pulling his trousers up over his rear end. They don't notice as I pedal by. I think of KariAnna and Kai—three more days until I see them.

The motor home is parked in front of the local store when I approach. My heel has been hurting when I ride uphill, and I'm thankful to finish the day. Kathy, who is working the register, has read the newspaper earlier and invites us to make ourselves at home. She fills out the Guinness Record form and has me sign a business card for her. She also lets me try their phone line, but once again I can't get the computer to work.

When I come back outside, a fit-looking man is looking at our motor home. "Just wanted a little inspiration," he says.

Dave turns out to be a teacher at the high school and a bicyclist. We talk traveling for awhile and then he invites me to the school in the morning.

"We have a computer support person who can probably get you straightened out."

"That would be great."

"He comes in around eight o'clock. The school's just a hundred yards up the road from here." It will be worth another late start to get e-mail out again.

We are in the Quinault Rain Forest tonight on the Quinault Indian Reservation. Jim, the owner of Camp Seven Pizza, is serving us French fries, talking to us about the ride, and keeping my dad's coffee cup full. I'm typing the day's events into the laptop. Another twenty minutes and the restaurant will close. Jim comes over and sits down with us.

"I've got a little motel up the road," he offers. "You can stay there complimentary tonight if you'd like." With strangers extending aid each day, I feel surrounded by a web of support and encouragement. My dad and I drive up to the motel and get a much-needed shower. I fall asleep content.

"I know what you do," a young boy says the next morning. Children are gathering around me before the start of classes here at Quinault Lake School.

"You show off and then people give you money," he finishes.

Waiting for the computer technician, I end up posing with the kindergarten and second grade classes and answering questions. One of the second graders blurts out of turn, “Can I come with you?”

I call on him when he raises his hand a bit later. He hesitates with his question, forming it carefully in his mind and then asks the exact same words again. A few minutes later he sneaks over to me with a piece of paper and pen, looking for a consolation autograph. Greg is his name, a boy with the traveling instinct. One day he’ll undoubtedly head off to dig for hidden treasure of his own.

A minor miracle happens this morning—thanks to Dave I get our e-mail sent and our “onewheel.org” web page updated. I pedal away from school and Amanda Park this morning, wondering if every town ahead will offer similar hospitality. A dozen of the kids say they saw me riding on the road yesterday. Half a dozen of them know we parked the motor home at Jim’s motel.

I ride past two more rainforests today, proof of how rare these bright skies are. The first forest is named Queets, and soon after I come to Kalaloch where Dad has lunch ready. Thirty-three miles on the odometer.

“Clay-Lock,” the woman corrects, after I try to pronounce the name at the Kalaloch Resort. She is filling out my Guinness form.

“People told me all morning to keep my eye out for you. I’m glad you stopped. Whatever possessed you to try something like this?” she asks.

“I’ve been riding a unicycle since I was ten. I want to see if I can get this wheel across the country.”

Farther north I pass by the turn-off into the Hoh Rainforest. Our road map shows the locations of the world’s largest Western Hemlock, Yellow Cedar, Subalpine Fir, and Douglas Fir, all in this area. As I ride I see old growth stumps big enough on which to pitch a large tent. It is so wet here that new trees grow out of the old nurse stumps. Some of them are forty feet high. Our destination today is Forks, a logging center for the last hundred years. The logging museum is here, but we’re too early in the season, so it’s closed.

I finish riding just after five o’clock in the afternoon, tired, sunburned, and ready to be finished after sixty-four miles. My knees are fine, my legs are fine, my rear is fine. My thighs are a bit chafed from rubbing against the seat all day, but the worrisome part today is my left Achilles tendon. It’s been growing tighter, stiffer, and more swollen these last two days. During the last fifteen miles today it hurt to push up the grades. I hope the pain is temporary.

Anne is home tonight when I call. I tell her about my heel.

“You should take it easy. Eighty-three miles was too much in one day,” she tells me.

I reply defensively that this is what the week is for, to see what I can do. But I know she’s right; we have a long way ahead of us. I can’t afford an injury right at the beginning.

Anne says she received a shipment of art from Alaska today: Inupiat Eskimo carvings and fur dolls that can be sold for the endowment fund.

“People will love seeing these,” Anne says as she describes them. “I can’t wait to get to Neah Bay.”

“Me too. And don’t worry, I’ll take it easy riding tomorrow. I’ll have the whole weekend to rest.” We talk a few more minutes together, anticipating being together again.

It is drizzling when I wake up, and it drizzles until the last hour of the ride to Neah Bay. The final fifteen miles of road wind up and down steeply. Highway 112 hugs the shoreline, and the shoulders are small or non-existent. Every mile feels long today. I’m soggy. My heel hurts. In Clallam Bay, after stopping at the store, it takes nine frustrating attempts to get balanced atop the unicycle.

Relieved to finally reach the Makah Tribal lands and Neah Bay, I see four high school girls standing by a beach as I ride past.

“Awesome,” one of them yells, “that is so totally awesome.”

I am beginning to dry out as I hear these words, at the same time seeing the first patch of blue sky. Yes, this does feel awesome to be riding into Neah Bay, the most northwest corner of the continental United States. Five days, three hundred five miles—I’m tired, but I’ve made my goal for this first week.

I pull in at Washburn’s store. Early in the century it was famous for selling Makah baskets. This afternoon there’s a table out front run by the high school class of 2002.

“My mom made the chili,” says the student who is serving. I order their biggest bowl, full of spice and warmth.

The tribal center is three miles outside of town, and we drive over to see where we’ll meet on Sunday. The facility was once an Air Force base GATOR station. High security radar monitored Cold War activities. Three hundred people were stationed here during those years. A dozen years ago, when the base was no longer needed,

it was turned over to the tribe. Randy, the caretaker, shares this history while he shows us the old cafeteria we'll be able to use.

"Pretty much everything works. Stove. Refrigerator. Sinks. Around the corner is where you can park your motor home. It's going to get real quiet out here as soon as work time is over."

The generous hospitality makes us feel at home. Backed by mountains and facing onto a small valley, we can see coastal rocks a couple of miles in the distance.

"The weather is supposed to be sunny this weekend," Randy continues. "We get 144 inches of rain a year here. But when the sun shines, it's unbeatable." He leaves us with a key and well wishes, entrusting the tribal center to us for the weekend.

Except for computer problems, everything has gone well on this shakedown ride along the Pacific Coast. During this past week I could have been anyone, experiencing the hospitality of the road: a plumber, broker, logger, teacher—single, married, sane, or not—following the white line north. Tomorrow I will be a pastor again. The bishop from Alaska and other church officials are coming to help celebrate the start of this ride for Seward Peninsula Lutheran Ministry.

If Mark Twain were here to watch my ride, he might like the unicycle but he would mistrust my profession. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, an orphan boy and a runaway slave show how our established communities so regularly get in the way of real care. Some of the worst of Twain's perpetrators of stifling propriety are preachers. Having been in the trade for almost ten years, I sympathize with his critique. Already the unicycle is carrying me past cultural expectations into a more direct experience of life's rich diversity.

Huckleberry Finn got outside the conventions of his time by rafting down the Mississippi. Fifteen years ago, I first escaped by bicycling across the United States. Once, at a roadside campfire in New Brunswick, Canada, I spent the night with Monique and Christian, two cyclists from Quebec. Except for a single photo album, they had sold everything they owned and set off on their ride to learn about life. Christian could speak little English, but his words carried power.

There is a voice inside each of us. It suggests a way of living that is right. When we sold everything, it made it easier to listen to this voice. It tells us about truth and about love. It's hard to listen. So often we want to make our own plans because we have read something or because of some advice or warning from other people. Now I am trying to learn to listen—not to warnings—but to the voice that teaches love.

By the time I finished all the pedals of my trek across the country, the cumulative unfolding of land and people was so powerful that I committed myself to pattern my life in light of this experience. In the fall of 1988 I enrolled at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley to explore how organized religion might give shape and direction to my experiences. Maybe I should have stuck with Mark Twain. At seminary I found myself back in the midst of convention. What a contradiction this seemed considering that the Christian faith was founded by one who died resisting social pressure to conform. I even got pressured into marriage.

Having fallen in love on my bicycle ride across the country, and then having developed our relationship by letter and phone, Anne and I decided to move together to seminary and explore our prospects for marriage. She came from Minnesota; I moved up from Los Angeles. In my second year I got kicked out of seminary for our living together. After much arguing it was agreed I could re-enter provided Anne and I got married "very quickly."

"Good," I replied, "We're already engaged to be married on June 23, eight months from now."

"Not good enough," the committee answered, "if you want to stay you need to get married within two weeks."

Against my natural inclination to get back on the road, Anne and I chose one week later to walk to the Alameda County Courthouse to sign a marriage certificate so that I could stay in seminary and become a pastor. With the stroke of that pen I returned from banishment to being accepted as an insider, but I had also come to know more deeply than ever what it is to stand outside assumed conventions. As Twain quipped, "Civilization is a limitless multiplication of unnecessary necessities."

After a long run of anger I came to regard my new perspective from the outside as a gift. The experience changed me forever. I take fewer things for granted, and I try to view a situation from as many angles as I can. Being an

outsider is not always an easy gift to bear—witness the outcast Huck, the runaway slave Jim, the crucified Jesus—almost any outsider will do.

Sometimes, after preaching a sermon, a person will come up and thank me; “You were telling my story this morning.” Now, at the northwest corner of our continental United States, I am turning again to search out the pieces of my own story.

On this single wheel my eyes turn backwards and forwards. I face to the past, hoping to recapture the transforming power of my cross-country bicycle ride and the life commitments I made then. I face to the future, wondering if the story from this coming journey will have power to hold life and death with new vision, new purpose, and new commitments.



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