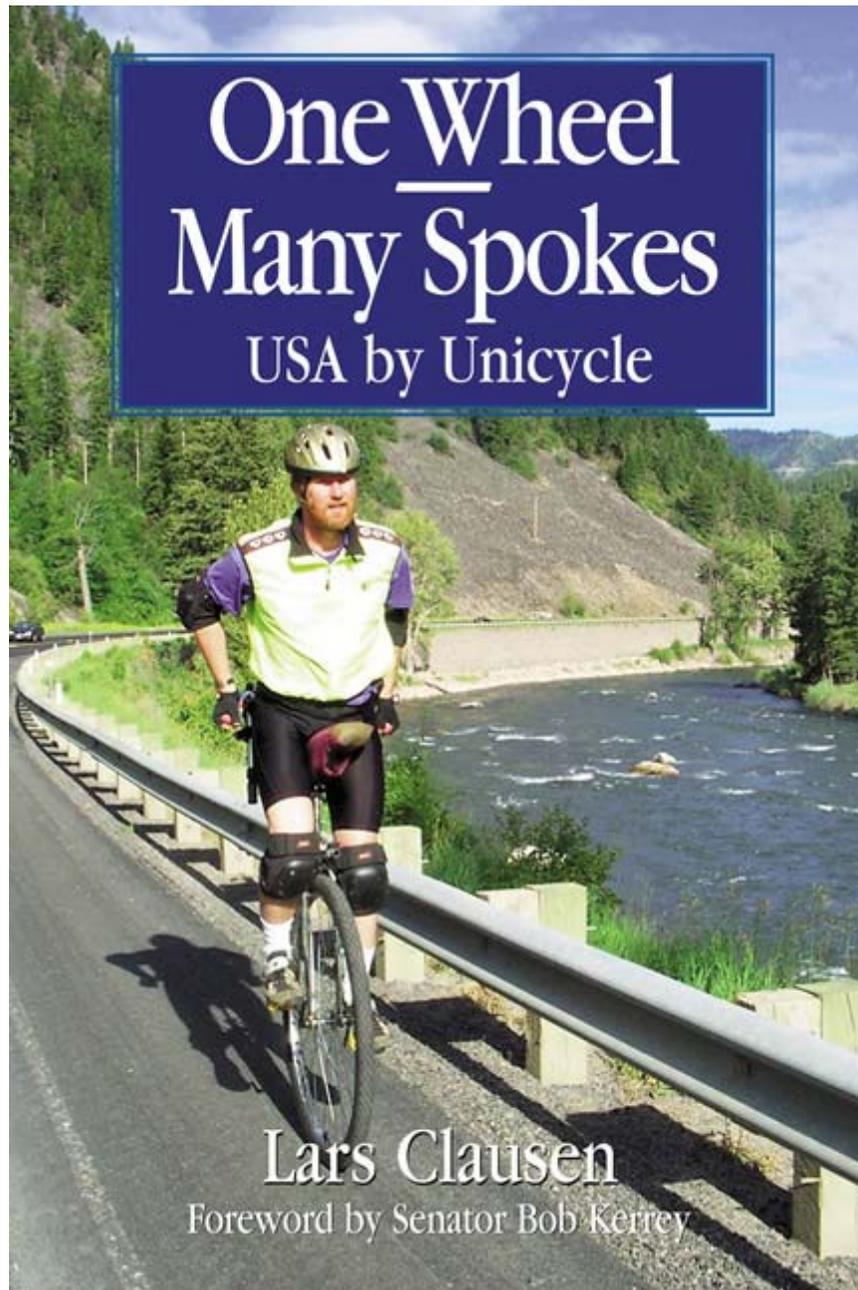


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**One Wheel — Many Spokes:
USA by Unicycle**

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Chapter 2

Busting Loose

There comes a time in every rightly constructed boy's life
when he has a raging desire to go somewhere
and dig for hidden treasure.

Mark Twain

My day comes on April 22, 2002. I wake up in Tillamook, Oregon, step out of our newly purchased ancient motor home, and enter the dark, drizzling Pacific Coast dawn.

"Good luck," Dad calls to me. He has volunteered to be my support crew this first week and to drive the motor home.

I hope that over the winter I've put my forty-year-old body through enough unicycle training for the journey ahead. At six-foot one, with my red beard, some people call me a Viking; since growing my blonde hair long others have begun joking that I look like Jesus. I walk across the parking lot to get signatures verifying the start of this attempt for the Guinness long-distance-unicycling world record.

"You're doing what?" asks Trish, unsure if she's heard right after her all-night shift at the Shilo Inn.

"I'm unicycling across America," I repeat. "I hope to be at the Statue of Liberty on August 10."

Time, date, location, verification address: She provides the necessary information on the slip of paper I hand to her.

At 6:22 a.m. I pedal past the Tillamook Cheese Factory and put into motion a dream that has required a full winter of preparation. I feel none of my customary new-beginnings apprehension this morning—just pure, total, utter amazement that I'm on the road and a full summer lies ahead.

It is eleven months since my family and I left Michigan and headed to Washington's Whidbey Island to explore the question, "How, now, shall we live?" I have watched too many friends settle for less than the life they dreamed. Mark Twain provided the necessary encouragement for our family to make a move:

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

Back then in Michigan, at the middle of my life, three weeks before my fortieth birthday I busted loose from my moorings. My wife Anne and our children, seven-year-old KariAnna and four-year-old Kai, were willing accomplices. Other than a chance to explore our lives, we didn't know what was ahead. As we loaded our mini-van for the drive west, I asked Anne if I could put my unicycle in on top of the luggage.

"See if it fits," she offered.

It did. I had some vague intention that the unicycle could help me lose the twenty extra pounds I'd picked up in four years of campus ministry at Michigan State University: too many pizzas with students, too little exercise because of sore feet.

With the unicycle on board we headed for Washington state. Even on the interstate, blasting along at seventy miles an hour, refueling at non-descript gas stations, and eating fast food day after day, my sense of freedom was increasing with each accumulated mile. Other times of freedom also came to mind as we drove—bicycling solo across the United States, and tandem-bicycle touring through Europe for our honeymoon.

When we got to Washington and reached Whidbey Island, we began moving in to share our friends' home on Whidbey Island. Kai was ecstatic and KariAnna depressed. Kai, the most gregarious one of our family, gained an instant playmate, another boy his age. KariAnna, alone, cried to me, "There aren't any girls here."

I went over to the couch and pulled her into my lap, stroking her long blonde hair and tear-stained cheeks. Silently we sat together.

"Do you want to learn to unicycle?" I asked at last, trolling hope, seeing if she might bite.

"I guess so," came her quiet response.

And in the way that people spin dreams to make the present bearable, KariAnna and I cheered ourselves with possibilities.

“We could ride all over together,” I offered. “We could ride to the store for ice cream. We could even unicycle across the country together,” I expanded.

“Yes,” KariAnna answered softly.

“When should we do it? In five years maybe?”

“How old will I be then?”

“Twelve.”

“Okay.”

A few minutes later we were down on the floor doing sit-ups and push-ups together, getting in shape for this vision that had brought joy to KariAnna.

KariAnna wasn't the only one struggling with this new change in our lives. A few days after the boxes were unpacked Anne turned to me, “Are you all right?” she asked. “Your eyes are glazed over and far away. What's the matter?”

Nothing was the matter—except that we were venturing into a new valley of uncertainty, a new unknown. This place can feel like the valley of the shadow of death, tempting us to turn from our dreams and return to familiar securities. I'd been there before. I poured another cup of coffee and waited for my eyes to return.

They refocused within a month. Out unicycling one day a vision opened to me as memories of bicycling across the country came flooding back: the sight of the white shoulder line, the asphalt road, the smell of the forest, the sound of the breeze and passing cars, the heat and the sweat that come with turning pedals. Why wait five years? I would ride across the country on a unicycle the next year. Doubtfully practical, undeniably powerful, the vision persisted despite the truth I had never pedaled more than a five-mile ride on a unicycle. In my mind's eye I saw the next summer stretch out before me, pedaling state by state from West Coast to East, living on the shoulder of the road.

Within a week Anne agreed that we would do this adventure as a family. “We started our marriage with a tandem-bicycle honeymoon. We can try this too.”

Now, on this first morning I am pedaling north on the shoulder of Highway 101. Lagoons here are filled with birds. Every few miles the road swings close enough for me to hear waves breaking on the shore. Log trucks roar by and leave the scent of fresh Christmas trees. At an oyster packing plant in Bay City, shells are stacked like gravel piles. Two men out testing the morning shout greetings from their porch across the highway. A man and his son, waiting for the school bus and accompanied by their chocolate lab, wave and smile.

Ahead of me a man pulls a fish from the lagoon. The drizzle stops and the gray sky lightens. Farther on a bicycle is pedaling into Garibaldi. On my one wheel I actually gain on the cyclist. He turns off before I catch him. A fishing bucket is jostling around in his handlebar basket.

As planned, Dad is driving the motor home this morning as my support crew for this first week. Past Garibaldi he pulls off the road to check on me.

“Everything is going perfectly,” I tell him.

Hans, my dad, is a Danish immigrant and retired engineer who grew up plowing fields with horses. His seventieth birthday comes this summer. He celebrated his fortieth by running his first marathon. I am thankful for his help with getting this ride started. He's the one who taught me to bicycle at the age of five. He's the one who taught me to unicycle when I was ten.

We plan to meet ten miles farther in the town of Manzanita. I am riding eleven or twelve miles an hour on these flat stretches of Highway 101. Just out of Nehalem the road turns a corner and suddenly a steep rise ends twenty-five miles of flat riding. I slow to a precarious wobble, shouting at myself, “Ride, ride, ride!”

I barely push over the top without falling.

Dad is waiting at the Edgewood Lounge parking lot when I catch up to him.

“The owner invited us in for a cup of coffee,” he says on first seeing me. “His name is Phil. He's from Alaska and used to work in Nome.”

It's dark inside, too early for the lounge to be open. Phil is the only one there.

“What can I pour you?” My dad is always ready for coffee. I get a cold Coke.

“Your dad says you used to live in Nome.”

Phil turns out to be a clinical psychiatrist. His work took him to Nome and many other villages in Alaska before he moved to Oregon and bought the Edgewood.

“Yeah,” I answer, “we were just visiting in Nome two weeks ago.”

We had been in Nome to be part of the Seward Peninsula’s Spring Conference, and to receive a blessing for the start of our adventure. Along with the unicycling, we are hoping to raise awareness of Lutheran Inupiat Eskimo ministry on Alaska’s Seward Peninsula.

I ask Phil, “Do you remember the Lutheran church across the street from the hospital?”

“Sure.”

“I used to be the pastor there.”

People’s response to my profession ranges from admiration to disdain. Phil shows a glimmer of surprise but reveals no opinion.

“So how does this all work, your ride, I mean?”

“Well, the ride is “One Wheel – Many Spokes,” I begin. “I pedal the wheel, but there are a lot of different spokes in this adventure.”

I tell Phil about the \$5,000,000 endowment, the five thousand miles on our route to the Statue of liberty, and how that translates to 3,300,000 turns of the wheel.

“That adds up to \$1.49 per turn of the wheel.” I say. “We’re hopeful we can help get the endowment filled.”

We are planning to speak in churches all across the country and tell the Seward Peninsula story—how there are fewer and fewer traditional societies left in our fast-paced modern world, and how this endowment will provide a stable resource to continue working out the intersections between ancient traditions and the pressures of the modern world.

“The Inupiat people will make all the decisions about how to use the money.” I continue. “That’s why Anne and I care so much about this project.”

“Alaska’s a special place. Why’d you leave?”

“I tired out after three years. You must know what it’s like working where our modern ways clash with traditional culture.”

“Yeah, I’d say so. I ended up working a lot with those problems. I tired out too. I hoped running this lounge would be a good change of pace.”

“Is it?”

“It’s mostly good. We have lots of tourists in the summer, but winter is long and gray and lonely. Too many people around here drink too much alcohol to get through winter. That’s not fun to deal with. It’s strange being the psychiatrist who sells alcohol now. But everyone feels better when the sun shines, and it doesn’t get any better than today.”

Phil is settling in here at the Edgewood, and I am turning to the open road—both of us are searching. I could easily spend the day here talking, exploring the oddity of this psychiatrist turned restaurateur. He might have as much fun with me, an engineer and a pastor heading cross-country by unicycle.

“There are lots of grades ahead,” he says as he bids us farewell in the parking lot. “You’ll find them longer but not as steep as that hill you climbed to get here.”

“Thanks for the Coke.”

“Pace yourself this summer.”

I get back on the road and start up a two-mile-long grade. Phil’s words are still in my head, “Pace yourself.” When I trained on Whidbey Island I often saw bald eagles soaring over me. This always seemed a good sign. Now, halfway up this climb, three buzzards take off from a tree and start circling over me.

“Not yet,” I yell up to them, “you’re too early.”



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