

THE HIGHS OF LOW TECHNOLOGY

Johanne Mednick

I have a wonderful bicycle. Most people refer to it as “the old clunker,” an ancient piece of metal the likes of which can be found in the dump or, if you’re lucky, at garage sales.

In other words, people trashed these things a long time ago. Mine is a souped-up version of the basic “no-speeder,” vintage 1930 or ‘40--two large wheels, seat, handle bars, basket, bell and the simple mechanism that allows me to pedal my way to wherever I’m going. I go uphill and downhill, easily gliding past all the riders on racers and mountain bikes intent on engaging the right gear for the occasion.

It’s not that I’m an Amazon bike rider or anything. In fact, I won’t make it up those hills if I don’t get the necessary run at the start. But I have confidence in my bike. It gives me power, and I cherish its simplicity.

What intrigues me, in this age of technological innovation (which is nowhere more apparent than in the bicycle world), is the number of people who stop me and comment on my bike. It’s a regular conversation piece. “Where did you get that thing?” “I haven’t seen one of those in ages.” “What a great bike.” I get all kinds of comments--the best one being from a motorcycle gang who cornered me while I was locking it up. They politely suggested to me that I wear gloves while riding to protect my hands. Maybe I should also don a leather jacket.

But really, what is it that people are admiring? Are they admiring me for resisting the lure toward mass bicycle consumerism? I must look like an eyesore pedaling behind my family, who all ride the latest model of designer-colored mountain bike. (To them, I’m some sort of anomaly, an embarrassment not fit to be on the road.) On the other hand, maybe people are just genuinely curious, as they would be if confronted with a dinosaur bone. I never get the feeling that they think I’m crazy for riding something archaic when I could be fiddling with gears and having a presumably easier time of things. I believe that this curiosity runs deeper. My bike seems to touch a sensitive chord in people, and I’m not quite sure what or why that is.

Perhaps my bike is representative of a world gone by, the world before gimmicks and gadgets, accessories and attachments. A time when people thought in terms of settling into a cushioned seat, stopping the movement with their heel and traveling a bit slower than we are traveling now. My bike is certainly not built for speed, but who needs speed when I can coast along the streets, hold my head high and deliciously feel the wind on my face? It’s built for taking time. It makes people feel relaxed.

When I’m riding my bike, I feel as though I have control. And I don’t feel that way about most things these days. I don’t deny that my computer or my microwave

make my life a lot easier. I use these things, but they also make me feel rather small and, in a strange way, inadequate. What if I press the wrong button? What if something goes wrong? Maybe if I learned to understand these appliances I'd feel better, more secure about my relationship with technology. But frankly, I'm not comforted by manuals and how-to courses. Of course there are always "experts" I could go to who seem to know everything about anything. Relative, friend or salesperson, these people seem to breathe the latest invention and revel in ingenuity.

I just don't get excited over yet another thing I could do if I pulled the right lever or set the right program. Nervous and unsure in the beginning, I eventually adapt to these so-called conveniences and accept them as a part of life, but I'm not entirely convinced of their merit. I crave simplicity and I have a sneaking suspicion that many people feel the same way. That's why they admire my bike. It comforts them and gives them a sense of something manageable, not too complicated.

I'm not suggesting that we go back to a pioneer-village mentality. But I do think it's important to respect that which is simple and manageable--no doubt difficult in a time when more is better and new is best. I'm proud that my clunker makes me and others feel good. It allows me the opportunity to relax and, at best when I'm heading down the road, escape what I don't understand.

TOPIC: For Mednick, what are the main satisfactions of using an outdated bicycle? To what extent do you agree with her assertion that using simpler technology than is available is satisfying? In formulating your answer you may refer to your experience, the experience of others, or to any of your reading, including, of course, "The Highs of Low Technology" itself.