

Parenthood: A Journey Between Bicycles

by Ben Adelman

Our son's first bicycle was a little red BMX-style bike with knobby tires and coaster brakes. I found it on Craigslist and went after work to check it out. The lady selling it said her child had outgrown it, and she was glad to know that the bike would live on to make another little boy happy. She didn't charge me much—maybe twenty bucks.

The bike was tiny, but the feeling was momentous. Buying our son, Abe, his first bicycle was a milestone. I was a fairly new dad at the time, but I sensed the step I had just taken was one of many that would lead to new experiences and more independence for our boy. I envisioned the journey he might take, learning to pedal and brake, learning to steer, and—someday—learning to balance without training wheels. After that, there would be no stopping him.

When I got home, I set about making the bike just right for the little guy. It needed a good wipe down, and there were rips in the vinyl saddle. A little black electrical tape would remedy that. I set the seat as low as it would go so he would feel safe and confident. When Abe went to bed, I put it in the hall outside his room so his new bike would be the first thing he would see when he woke up. I looked forward to sharing that moment with him, to seeing the wonderment on his face when he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and slowly registered that the little red bicycle belonged to him.

Many years, rides, and bicycles later, we were preparing to send our son off to college. He is eighteen now, six feet-six inches, and he outgrew his most recent bike a few years ago. These days he doesn't have much interest in riding. Driving is far more fun. He wouldn't have a car on campus, though, so in my mind, at least, a bike would really benefit his quality of life.

For much of the summer I kept an eye out for the right one. My criteria were simple: His new bike needed to be cheap so if it were rained on or stolen, we wouldn't be too upset; and it needed to be big enough to fit his gangly frame. A mountain bike, as opposed to a road bike, would be a bonus, since there are lots of great trails around Burlington, VT, where he would be attending college.

So I couldn't believe my good fortune when I went to the recycling center one Saturday and spotted a hardtail 29er in the metal recycling bin. It was a GT Backwoods, and red, to boot. The back wheel was off, and it was missing a saddle and seat post, but otherwise it was in decent shape. The attendant let me take it.

When I got home, I immediately got to work. The back brake needed service, a quick-release skewer was missing, and the drivetrain needed tuning—all easy, cheap fixes. I dove headlong into my new project. I tweaked, cleaned, and adjusted. I zipped out on test rides, tools bouncing in the pocket of my cargo shorts, feeling small way up there in my son's new saddle.

At some point I stopped to take stock. I have a tendency to go all in when I tackle a project, but I realized in this case I was particularly invested. I felt an exuberance and an urge to make this bike just right. It wasn't as if there weren't plenty of other, more important jobs to do, but this one took on a singular focus that bordered on obsession. I wondered why—it was, after all, just a crappy old bike I found at the dump.

Searching myself, I realized the answer was quite simple: With this project, I was giving my boy his last bike. Sure, there will be bicycle purchases in his future, but I won't be the one making them. This ride represents a final milestone, a sendoff. Providing your child with a bicycle is an act that is elemental to parenthood. The journey starts with that special first bike, followed by that wobbly first ride without training wheels, you jogging alongside shouting encouragement—and wondering if you let go too soon.

Abe has outgrown five bikes in his years. I remember each one clearly, where we got it, watching him ride. Sometimes we rode together. Other times he ventured out alone or with friends. Maybe I taught him some things along the way. Maybe I helped him feel safe and confident. No doubt in many ways I let him down. Now, that journey is coming to an end.

The window for raising children is finite. Parenthood is a ride that has a beginning and an end. Of course, I will always be there for Abe, but he's a man now, headed out on his own. I no longer fit into his life the way I did when he was a child, and that's as it should be. These days, I am envisioning him venturing out on his tall dump bike, trusting the brakes I fixed for him as he coasts the big hills of Burlington, and downshifting his dialed-in drivetrain to reach new heights that will be his experiences, and his alone.



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