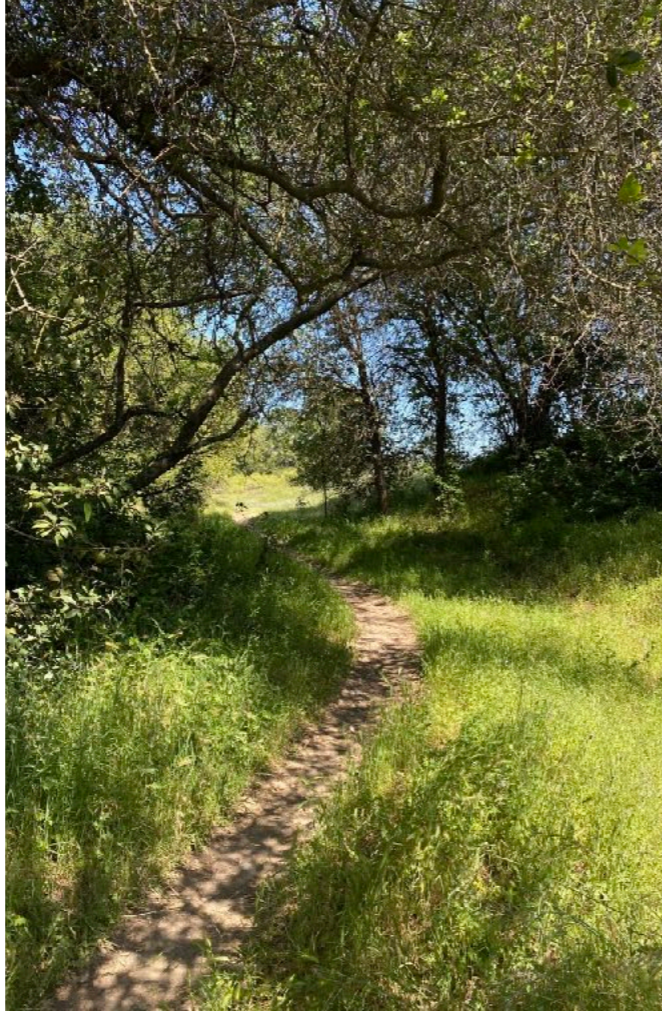


Homer Christensen

Feeling Loopy





The same route backwards is sometimes an entirely new one—new sights tinged with a familiarity that happens over time.

My friend Greg avoids backtracking on a route—an out-and-back—and instead looks for alternate routes to return to the spot where he started—more of an imperfect circle.

I get that. There are reasons we have phrases like *in a rut*. Doing the same path can get tiresome.

However, when the pandemic lockdown started, the options for exploring widely diminished at the same time as the local bike paths crowded up. In an effort to social distance, we were all pretty much walking on top of each other.

Out of mental necessity, I needed to ride the local pavement as little as possible and instead stick to the sometimes pretty challenging but definitely less trafficked trail around Lake Natoma.

Lake Natoma is only a few blocks from my house, so it was an easy choice to hop out for a quick 12-mile lunchtime ride. To get there, I'd need to ride down the hill, connect to the bike path, cross the river over the pedestrian bridge to the Northern path, pass the boat ramp—more of an SUP and kayak launching point, really—and then connect up to the trail about a half-mile further.

The first few times I did that it was maddeningly slow. All of the walking paths were crowded with families trying to get their suddenly home-schooled kids out of the house, couples riding their new bikes (some a bit shakily), or cliques of friends four abreast.





The First Lesson

I learned patience quickly. Or rather, I learned that where I had thought of myself as a patient easy-going person, I was faced with the opposite reality. I could not ignore that I was bothered by all these people impeding my ride.

Like many others, I was a bit wrought with uncertainty, existential dread, and general unease. I needed to move, to do something. To get out and ride. Sometimes fast, pushing through ease to where I could get physical to override the mental.

So I practiced patience because I needed to. I reasoned that it was such a good thing that people were using the bikepaths, that people were enjoying the outdoors, exercising, away from screens and couches. I could feel myself relaxing, accepting. That only went so far, for I was daily confronted by loose dogs or unwatched children wandering across the path.

One of the pandemic corollaries early on was as the paths filled, the roads emptied. So I devised a route through the old town to the car bridge (with a pedestrian lane as well as a bike lane) and along an upper route that connected to the bike path after the boat ramp.

One half mile later, I was on the dirt part of the trail. That's where I learned lesson two.





The Second Lesson

Horses. The first part of the lockdown was fairly limited to bikes and hikers and their pets. When things leveled out, the horse rides started in earnest.

Horses are intelligent, sentient beings and, though I've never owned one, I did have a couple of rescue donkeys years ago on my little farm. So I have a great deal of respect and affection for them.

In light of all of the recent discussions on race, I finally put a finger on my unease of horse culture. It just feels a bit like slavery. I used to buy into the Western myths of man and horse becoming as one, but now it just seems like they are very literally whipped and kicked for their owner's pleasure or commercial gain.

And so, when I encountered horse riders, I immediately dismounted my bike, laid it down, and stood off the trail so that I didn't cause any discomfort to the horses, most of which don't seem to trust these thin things devoid of footfall.

Waiting out the downtrodden horses carrying their masked cargo helped grow patience.



Lesson Three

The first two lessons led to the third: *Fast or slow doesn't matter, you can focus on and improve technique and skills.*

I'm one of those head-in-the-clouds people who can just be completely in the moment, enjoying the experience of what I'm doing. I like that aspect of my personality. What that translates to often, however, is that I float through experiences rather than going deep within them.

Riding this same loop over 18 months and counting, practicing patience, and not insisting on my needs being prioritized (let's face it: that's what the stopping for the horses really was about) freed me up really look at the different aspects of the landscape that I passed through,



forward and back and along the side pathways and alternate routes.

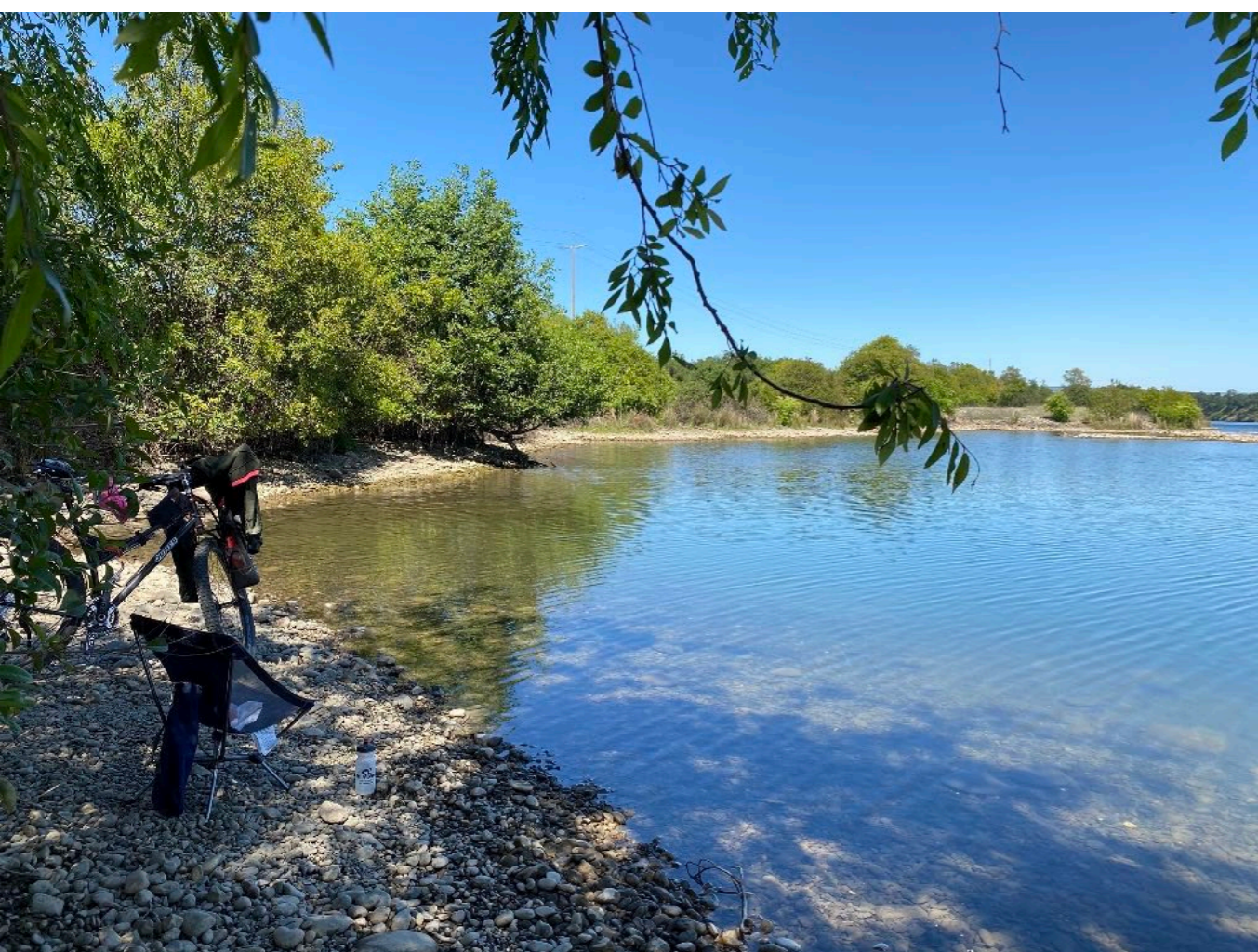
I got to practice going through patches of baby-head rocks, descending or climbing on a shifting, unstable landscape.

Developers normally like to name places for what we've displaced or destroyed: Fox Glen, Whispering Pines, Quail Haven. Lake Natoma, however, was named for the destroyer.

From 1858 till 1962, the Natomas Company floated huge barges (think football-field huge) and tore up the surrounding landscape harvesting around 200 million dollars worth of gold from millions of cubic feet of land. Unable to buy the town of Folsom to dredge it, too, they simply encircled it. Consequently, the area is littered with rock piles, some hundreds of feet tall.

Most of the rock piles have been leveled out and built on, holding housing developments, aerospace manufacturing, and tilt-up buildings. But around the lake, they're mostly untouched, veined by trails and paths made by hoofs or boots, connected by a paved path that skirts the shore.

Nature has diligently worked to reclaim this land, adding soil each vegetative cycle. The true pioneers here are the plants, hopeful and undaunted.



So I got to practice traversing this rocky landscape, faster or slower, the earth clinging after a rain or powdered by the valley heat. I bunny hopped, descended ever steeper inclines, navigated grass-covered rock beds where wheel-stops waited unseen.

One particular bugaboo was a curving upwards narrow path with a root crossing it, alongside a steep drop-off to a canal. I rode this twice daily, practicing it on the uphill and then down. I walked it several times after I got bounced off, suddenly stopped by a rock embedded in the ledge that the 29" tires couldn't surmount.

I fell once as my tire slid down to the canal as the gravel gave way, startling some kayakers. Mostly, I made it.

This was a musical practice, an athletic exercise to gain competence. I could be accused of *underbiking* sometimes, but I feel that one rides at their level of confidence, skill, and equipment. I'll never have Danny MacAskill's balance or Lael Wilcox's endurance and speed, but I have those I've developed riding these and other trails repeatedly and with purpose.

Which, of course, led me to the greatest lesson.

Lesson Four

Gratitude.

The feeling of gratitude pervaded everything I did. I felt lucky to not have Covid-19. I felt lucky to have the opportunity to ride, the location, the equipment. The health to do so. The freedom. The coolness of a lake swim. Mulberries and blackberries, warm from the sun.

Some of the underpinning feelings of gratitude I can't even verbalize. They're foundational to our being human. Joseph Campbell once said that the first best things can't be comprehended, the second can't be spoken, and so we're left describing the third best things with words that aren't up to it. We know it in the mind of our heart.

There was one particular part of the ride that comes after riding some closer paths and then as you pass through a narrow opening, the sky and land just open up. Like my heart, too. It got me every time.

It gave me hope, like Covid would be done. Like the political maul that splintered my family would be forged into a bridge. Like we'd make it, we humans and fellow life forms. Healthy. Safe. Free. On an equitable footing. Not on mars or in some other place or time, but here, now.