

Initiating Kindness

Don't call it "mooching"

By Willie Weir

Randal and Will take up residence in a hay barn. "There's nothing like a pile of hay to make you feel like you're in bed at home," says Will.

My friend Randy joined me for a couple of weeks of cycling on the South Island of New Zealand. Thanks to a tip from one of Randy's co-workers, who is a Kiwi, we had both changed our names. You see, Down Under, "Randy" is the term used to describe someone who is sexually excited, while "Willie" serves the same purpose assigned to "Peter" and "Dick" in this country when referring to the male anatomy. Imagining the consequences of Randy walking into a pub and innocently saying, "Hi. I'm Randy and I'd like to introduce you to my friend Willie," led us to travel as Randal and Will.

Randy had heard hundreds of my stories about past adventures — how I avoided campgrounds whenever possi-

ble, preferring to knock on a door at the end of the day's travels, and how these encounters often led to home-cooked meals and soft feather beds — and had a term for my style. He called it "mooching" or "freeloading." I preferred my own term, which was "initiating kindness."

Before you laugh as Randy always did, let me explain. You see, I believe that most people want to be kind. But today's fast-paced, paranoid, technology-driven society has robbed them of most opportunities. You don't pull over to

help someone who is having car trouble. You call 911 on your cell phone instead. You don't give spare change to the man or woman with the cup and the sign reading "No Food, No Work." You send a check to a food bank instead.

If someone knocks on your door and asks to use the phone, you give them directions to the nearest pay phone, because prime time television has convinced you that most strangers are on the FBI's most wanted list.

Enter the touring cyclist, the last of a dying breed. When we ask for water or directions or for a place to set up our tents, we initiate kindness. Because of the inherent vulnerable and innocent qualities that a bicyclist projects, people are able to get past all the warnings our society has heaped on them about thieves, rapists, and mass murderers. They can reach out and be kind to a fellow human being, and that makes them feel good.

I used to feel guilty that people were housing and feeding me without getting anything in return. Then, one morning in upstate New York, I was thanking a family who had taken me into their home during some severe thunderstorms.

The mother gave me a big hug and said, "No. It is I who need to thank you. For the first time in years, I am going to go to the office today and have something exciting to tell my co-workers."

People love to vicariously be part of an adventure. It's the very reason that many a touring cyclist who is not on the road, pulls over anyone with a bike and panniers and insists on helping them somehow. If we can't be on our own adventure, being part of somebody else's is the next best thing.

I know that the Boy Scouts' motto is "be prepared," but I say the traveling cyclist's motto should be "don't be too prepared." You can't be an initiator of kindness if you travel with panniers stuffed with energy bars, enough spare parts to stock a mid-sized repair shop, and a state-of-the-art global tracking system.

Randy had heard all about my theory, but he still called me "The World's Greatest Mooch." We agreed that we would camp at campgrounds if they were available, but if the situation called for it, he would be willing to knock on a door or two.

Late in the evening of our first day of pedaling, we pulled into a pub. After eating a few mutton sandwiches and playing a

game of darts, we cycled through town, wondering where we could stay. I spied a Catholic church one block away. The architecture wasn't unique, but the color was. Bright purple.

"Hey, Randy. Let's go initiate some kindness."

Randy rolled his eyes at me, but gave the go-ahead.

I knocked on the door of the church and was greeted by Father Leo. When I asked him if we could pitch our tents on church property, he said he could do us one better and offer us beds for the night. Father Leo was quite a character, and



PHOTOS BY WILLIE WEIR



Sheep ranching couple who took Will in with "a meal, a shower, and more food than I could pack away." The puppy joined Will for the night and was "a good tentmate."

were spectacular, and it was fun to watch Randy reach his first summit on a fully loaded mountain bike. We had been friends since high school, but our busy lives rarely gave us time to spend with one another anymore. We pedaled hour after hour, talking of anything and everything.

We stopped and asked for water at one farm and ended up eating lunch with a man named Ross, who was working a piece of land with a friend, removing the rocks so it could be planted. The rest of the lads there were "musterers," called

kept us up late telling us stories about the townsfolk and explaining the rules of cricket. Before we went to bed he answered my burning question.

"We got the paint on sale. It was supposed to be pale blue. But it dried purple. We don't have any more money in the restoration budget, so purple it will remain. It kind of grows on you."

The next morning, after hearty bowls of oatmeal, Father Leo walked us out to our bikes.

"Thank you, lads, for stopping in. Between Sundays it can get lonesome here. God bless you."

The next evening we decided to camp. Campgrounds in New Zealand are plush by U.S. standards, with manicured grounds, clean bathrooms with large showers, and a kitchen block with stoves and sinks for all to share.

Our perfectly flat site had a view of the lake. We went down to a field and watched some locals play "touch sevens," a less brutal form of rugby. We returned and ate ramen noodles with vegetables. We were surrounded by dozens of travelers, yet no one said a word to us. Everyone was busy with his or her own travel agenda.

We quietly pulled out of our campsite in the early morning and pedaled toward our first New Zealand mountain pass. The views

that because they muster up the sheep from the fields, with the help of well-trained sheepdogs, for shearing, dipping, tailing and weaning.

They all thought the roads in New Zealand were too crowded. We tried to explain Los Angeles and the traffic there — "Now picture every sheep as a car..."

After awhile, we left, having filled our bellies with lamb, potatoes, carrots and bread pudding.

Pedaling slowly down the highway, we waited for our feast to digest. We hadn't discussed where we'd sleep that evening. I wasn't too keen about spending the remainder of our nights in campgrounds, but I was willing to do whatever made Randy the most comfortable.

Late in the afternoon, I finally asked, "So what will it be tonight, camping or knocking?"

Randy stopped pedaling and looked at me with a wry smile.

"Let's initiate some kindness," he said. ●

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