Though the road is rocky, sure feels good to me
And if I’m lucky, together we’ll always be
I hummed the tune “Rainbow Country” by Bob Marley and the Wailers as we rolled along a gravelly portion of the trail. Like a well-worn talisman, I sang the same lyrics on repeat as the sun bore down on my back and my bike trailer resisted each rock I encountered.

My husband Marc and I and our two young children (a one-and-half-year-old daughter and a four-year-old son) were on our first official family adventure cycling trip, from Cumberland, Maryland to Washington, DC, along the C&O Canal towpath, and we had gotten off to a bumpy start.

Our route covered 185 miles over four and a half days in early June 2020, staying in lodging near the towpath along the way. We planned a generous itinerary to allow space for fun and a cushion for the unexpected. This was our entrance into the world of family adventure cycling, and we wanted it to be a pleasurable experience for all four of us.

This wouldn’t be the three-month-long bike tour of our pre-married lives when Marc and I cycled from Finland to Italy — spontaneously deciding when and where to stop, camping in a potato field in Germany and frying the freshly-harvested leftovers, soaked to the bone and satisfied after a full day of rain in the Netherlands, rolling through the open mountain meadows of Switzerland, counting mushrooms in Sweden.

On that trip, we carried only what we ourselves needed, and did or didn’t do only what we ourselves wanted. This C&O Canal trip with our two kids was a different kind of adventure.

On our pre-married adventure cycling trips, we had often stayed up too late and lingered in our sleeping bags as the morning grew warm, leisurely repacking our panniers while sipping coffee. On the first day of this family trip, we were raring to go after sunrise cries and cuddles, hastily repacking among a flurry of breakfast and re-helmeting four heads.
In my eagerness to pack well, I had maybe overpacked just a tad, but with two young kids in tow, I was trying to be prepared! Extra pants, extra snacks, and extra wipes meant a lot of extra weight. We started with both kids on Marc's bike, using our two-child Weehoo. After some fussing from the baby, we transferred some of the gear in my Burley trailer onto the Weehoo and moved the baby onto the trailer to ride with me. It didn't work. I was struggling to keep up, and our daughter shrieked from her cozy enclave with each pedal stroke. With each of her screams, my leg muscles shouted back in response. No changes we tried worked to soothe her, and I was mentally and physically maxed out. First Family Bike Tour, Day 1.

As we rolled into our first night of lodging, I wondered how I'd be able to care for our energetic children and meet my own needs after riding double those miles in the following days. I told myself to stay in the moment, that I only needed to think about each foot pushing the pedal each time. Yet my mind lurched ahead to the challenges I saw down the road.

After the kids went to sleep that evening, I decided to relinquish control and trust the process — to be in the moment as much as possible and presume that solutions would arise. Not knowing how the rest of this trip would go sounded a little unnerving to my mom-mind, which had adapted to routines and predictability, but that's the "adventure" part we were seeking, right?

I woke up the next morning determined to embody the guidance I often give our four-year-old, to have a positive attitude and view obstacles as stepping stones from which to heighten my vantage point. As I fed and clothed the children, Marc concocted a new cargo setup that attached much of my load to his. The two-child Weehoo and single-passenger Burley trailer filled with our belongings were now both attached to his bike — engine, passenger car, caboose. He hauled with joy the majority of the weight that had impeded me from keeping pace that first day.

Ah, what a metaphor for marriage! Equilibrium isn't in carrying the same weight regardless of strength, but finding the balance that helps everyone move forward together. He yoked my burdens to his with a smile on his face, always happy to crank any way and any how. He had the two most important passengers in our world in tow, and he loved every minute of it. And on that second day, the baby showed how quickly she had adapted to her first bike tour and sat like a Buddha in her seat, just like her big brother in the seat in front of her.

The rest of our trip went on like this: the dappled sunlight sending warm beams through the green leaves, the crunch of our tires along the gravel, a placid breeze caressing our faces and the swaying trees. Even though civilization was so near, we were in refuge, the masks and anxieties of COVID-19 feeling a world away. The occasional fellow reveler we saw would often greet our little train with a smile upon seeing our two little ones enjoying the ride.

As we took our lunch break in the grass by the Potomac River on a magically breezy, just-warm-enough day, our children were fully engaged in spotting insects on a tree, and the closer they looked, the more diverse and fascinating insects they found: beetles, arachnids, ants, and winged ones too. Whether on the bike or off, they were absorbed in their surroundings at each moment, trusting their needs to be met as they arose, not questioning what we were doing next or why we were even doing this at all.

On previous trips, we had taken in the sights through the filter of our own interests, but this time we were guided by the interests of our children. “Look, an owl! Hoot hoot!” The excitement was palpable for us all as we spotted a young owl flying so close over our heads, perching a mere 12 feet away. We squealed with glee over a snapping turtle making her nest to lay eggs, or a herd of deer bounding across our path. We made up silly songs about the wildlife we saw: counted birds, turtles, snakes, and groundhogs; and gave math problems to our four-year-old about squirrels and their nuts. We were a team, and we moved through the world together at a perfect pace for us.

This was it. There was no running around trying to multitask, send emails, or clean the house. It was simply being together, observing our surroundings, bathing in the beauty of our children discovering this world. We didn't need to go far from our northern Virginia home to do this; we simply needed to pay closer attention, to see life as they do from their young eyes.

As we rode along, “Rainbow Country” arose again in my mind with an apropos refrain:

*I feel like dancing, dance 'cause we are free*

Our family was free in the world, our little bike train taking in all the moments as one.

And if I’m lucky, together we’ll always be ☀️

Aziza Bayou is an anthropologist and adventure cycling enthusiast residing in Fairfax, Virginia. She teaches anthropology at George Mason University and is a wife and mother of two. In her free time, she writes poetry, cooks, dances, reads, and of course rides her bike.