

A simple ride

Note: We are in the shortest month of an odd year. Hence, I decided to do something a bit different with my column; I wrote a short story. I'll jump back into the non-fiction world soon enough. Till then, enjoy.

In a nondescript city, not unlike the small Midwestern city of Galesburg, Ill., lives a man named Jack. He is in his 30's and has held a managerial position in a local business for several years. Jack attended a four year college where he majored in economics. This background led him to seek employment in the business sector. Looking back, Jack feels very fortunate to have taken only two weeks upon graduating to land a secure job. With the handsome income he brings in, he has been able to put away a good deal of money over the last ten years. It brings Jack great comfort to read his retirement fund statements which arrive quarterly in the mail.

Jack's daily routine largely consists of working and sleeping. He goes to work very early and sits behind an office desk nearly the entire day. On weekends, he isn't often free either, due to the fact that business reports have to be completed regularly and it is his sole responsibility that they get done promptly and accurately. Not surprising, his busy schedule doesn't lend itself to social encounters (romantic or otherwise) and as such Jack spends most of his private time alone. Yet, since he is always so busy, he doesn't really have time to be lonely. Sure, he expects to get married some day and even have kids, but as much as this seems an obvious future outcome, very little in his life suggests that it will actually happen. The years just keep ticking by.

One of Jack's passions involves driving around in his grayish convertible looking at architecture and gardens. Jack grew up in an old Victorian home with a rather large backyard, where his mom spent many hours in the flower beds. His city is replete with older homes with well-cared for gardens, so these drives provide Jack a bit of a break from the mundaneness of his job.

One spring day, Jack was driving home from the grocery store, something he did bright and early each and every Saturday so as to avoid longer lines and awkward social encounters, when he noticed that a house at the end of his block was having "the Garage Sale of the Century." After unloading his items in his fridge and cupboard, he decided to head down to see if this sale was half what it was cracked up to be. Jack loved a good deal and sometimes felt beckoned by "For Sale" signs. When he arrived at the cul-de-sac, he was impressed

yet somewhat intimidated by the hordes of people present. They were swarming among the piles of goods like worker bees in a hive. After spending about ten minutes wandering through the yard and garage (he didn't like to hang around too long for fear of seeing one of the few people he knew in town), Jack determined that most of what he saw was nothing more than the standard junk one finds at such events (stuff that if he bought would undoubtedly end up either in his trash, on a shelf in his already cluttered house, or, worse yet, in a yard sale he would need to have). So he set off to leave, feeling quite comfortable being empty handed. Yet, just as he was opening the door of his vehicle, he was struck by a glimmering light off to his right. He turned to find that this glister emanated from a shiny bicycle in the yard. As if drawn in by its rays, Jack felt he should go check it out. Upright and resting against a small maple tree, it was a model very much like the one he rode as a child. And given that he didn't own a bike, he began to consider if he ought to get one. Leaning over to see its tag, Jack was pleasantly surprised to see how inexpensively it had been priced. Acting more impulsively than usual, Jack pulled a \$20-dollar bill out of his wallet, handed it to the homeowner, and threw the bike into the backseat of his high-powered machine. On his short jaunt home, Jack wondered if he would ever ride it. He wasn't sure but at least it was now an option.

The next morning, Sunday, Jack woke up extra early to a melodious song coming from the crabapple tree outside his bedroom window. He headed downstairs to get the morning paper. Opening the door, he noticed three people, probably a mother, father, and their young teenager, moseying down the street on their bikes—apparently undeterred by its narrowness or the many cars parked on it. While seeing a biker in his neighborhood wasn't unusual, it was quite atypical to see a family riding together or to see adults riding at all. Jack took some satisfaction in knowing that he lived in a safe neighborhood and one where people were beginning to go outside and recreate. These three neighbors even looked like they were enjoying their leisurely ride. Having returned to his kitchen table to drink a cup of coffee and read the headlines, Jack couldn't help but reminisce about his childhood days when he and his older brother (his lone sibling) used to pedal around chasing butterflies from garden to garden nearly every Saturday during the warm months of the year.

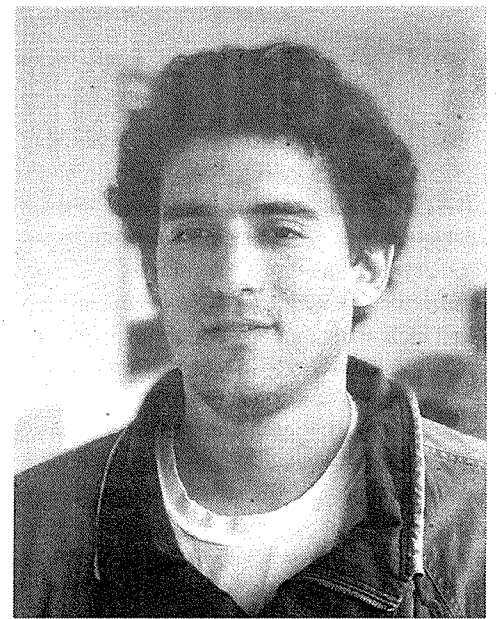
Perky from the caffeine, Jack felt antsy.

He had another report to complete today but he just wasn't feeling like spending the entire sunny day behind his computer screen. Perhaps he could try out this new bike of his. But, oh, how out of shape he was; fiddling with a keyboard ten hours a day just doesn't count as exercise no matter how fast you type. But, he thought, what are the flatlands of the Midwest good for if not a bike ride by an aerobically-challenged individual like himself. Putting excuses behind him, Jack went to dress himself in athletic looking garb—something not so easy to find in his closet full of business attire.

Donning a simple T-shirt, kaki shorts and a pair of low tops, the same outfit that he wore to mow the lawn, Jack set off on an adventure. Having not thought out his route before he was already perched atop his two-wheeler, Jack had no plans except to avoid getting dehydrated (something he did consider and so had brought a generic water bottle). After about 30 minutes and some 5 miles out of town (Jack had taken Main Street as far as he could go without stopping), he pulled over to take break and rejuvenate in preparation for the return home. Under an old oak tree that spread its branches skyward as if stretching after a long nap, Jack began to retrace his steps during this half-an-hour trip. Albeit brief, he had observed so much in so little time. It was if a whole new world had begun to open up.

Not more than a block from his house, Jack had to break for a stop sign. On bike, he was more careful to come to a complete stop and look both ways. While at the stop sign, he looked down to make sure that his foot was properly engaging the pedal—the bottoms of his shoes were quite worn after hundreds of mows. As he did so, he noticed how much garbage lay along the curbside—a pair of relatively new sneakers, the casing for a cell phone, three empty plastic bottles, and several shards of sharp glass—dangerous looking yet beautifully iridescent. Never before had he considered how much junk was to be found along the streets. This observation prompted Jack to ruminate over a series of related questions. Where had these materials come from? Who put them there? Who was going to pick them up? Where would they end up? Was his city always so polluted? Why hadn't he noticed this before? (This latter question became recurrent because as he rode on these seemingly small piles of roughage kept "appearing" before him, as if sending a message of some sort.)

Stuck for awhile at this intersection, waiting for a funeral procession to pass, Jack also began to smell something awful. The more he stood there waiting, the sicker he became. What the heck was he smelling? He looked around circumspectly and noticed that the lawns in front of the houses to his immediate right and left each had little white flags sticking out from them. Though, not much of a lawn "care" expert, Jack knew enough to know that these flags were placed to indicate that chemicals had been put on the lawn to ward off pesty insects and/or weeds. By gosh, it was the lawn chemicals that were making him feel sick. Breathing through his mouth (rather than his sensitive nose) seemed to help, but Jack couldn't help thinking what these poisons might be doing to him—an innocent passerby. He wasn't much of a scientist but he still remember something prophetic in his high school chemistry class—if you smell something, it exists **and** it is now in your body. Yikes. These thoughts only made him feel sicker. Oh, how he wanted to move on. Fortunately, he didn't have to wait too

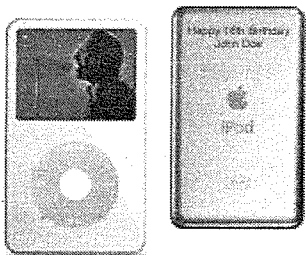


much longer.

A couple of blocks farther on, this time Jack got stopped by a passing eastbound train—one consisting of open car after open car of coal (apparently carrying low-sulfur black fuel from the Western states). While waiting, he began to sneeze and his eyes began to water, things that rarely happened to Jack—he was one of the fortunate among us who didn't have allergies. Jack had routinely been stopped by passing trains, so this was nothing new, but on a bike, he was able to stop within only a few feet of the passing cars. Here he was better able to "smell" them and physically, albeit involuntarily, respond to them. So while waiting for some five minutes, Jack contemplated why he was reacting so strongly this time. Was it because the coal cars weren't covered with a tarp or something? As best as he could remember, he routinely saw coal cars open and coal heaped like jagged mountain tops sitting in them. Was it because he was exercising (and so breathing more deeply)? Was it because he was too close to the train? He knew not why but he wondered. Also, as he looked to his left, he noticed that several homes (where his fellow city folk lived) were located within spitting distance of the train tracks. He began to think about what it must be like to live so close to the tracks that one can literally smell the chemicals that were being carried on them day in and day out. Were these residents immune to these noxious fumes or had they just adapted to them? Never before had Jack ever considered this question.

Well, the train passed and Jack got back on his bike. A few blocks farther down Main Street, the train was a distant memory as were his running nose and water eyes. However, as he approached another big intersection, the light turned yellow then red. He came to a full stop. While waiting for the next color change, up pulled a noisy pickup truck. The excessive noise wasn't due to the booming volume of its radio or the activity of grade-A woofers, rather, the noise was coming directly from the rear section of the vehicle. Apparently, its muffler was on the fritz. As it accelerated upon the greening of the traffic light, a heavy cloud of black sooty smoke billowed on poor Jack just as he gathered himself for the first pedal. Consumed with this smoke, Jack had to stop breathing for a few seconds. A few seconds later and finally through the intersection, Jack pulled over on the sidewalk to regain his composure and his breath. What had just happened? The driver, now blocks away in the distance, didn't mean any harm but nonetheless Jack felt violated. Why did he have to breathe these fumes? Clearly, there had to be a law against vehicles with such poor exhaust systems. Wasn't there? Jack actually didn't know. How much poison had he consumed and would it impair his health for the rest of the day/week? Jack didn't know. How often had he himself been the driver (or passenger) of a motorized vehicle which had released similar irritants (perhaps poisons) out on another unsuspecting

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DIGITAL FEVER

Mike Kroll

Choices, choices, choices

bicyclist or pedestrian? Jack wondered.

Unwilling to let this incident deter him, Jack gathered his thoughts and his bike and set off again. Once out of the city, the roads became a bit rougher. This was fine since Jack's bike had wider tires than a typical 10-speed. And while the bumping did slow Jack down a bit, he didn't seem to mind. But, yet again, Jack's eyes began to water and his nose began to tickle, so he pulled off into the ditch (as no sidewalk or shoulder could be found). Looking back towards the city, Jack spotted the culprit of his malady clear as day. His little bike and he had created a significant trail of dust. Not visible to him during his ride since he pedaled straight ahead the entire way, this dust was surely the source of his discomfort. Jack shook his head in amazement. And while he stood there in the ditch (appropriately cluttered with samples of "modern" garbage), he noticed how each and every car that passed from either direction would also be followed by a ghostlike stream of suspended dirt. Did this always happen? It must, Jack thought. But, once again, why hadn't he noticed this before? He had driven on these "dusty" roads; not everyday, mind you, since he lived in the city, but certainly often enough to have noticed something so visible and predictable.

Not exhausted yet, Jack continued his ride. Bumpy and a bit dusty, the ride improved because Jack focused more on the new vistas that were opening up in front of him rather than on his physical ailments. Although, most of what he observed were just patches of dirt (since the corn and soy that would soon fill the void hadn't yet pierced the surface), Jack was still amazed at how far in the distance he could see and how large the sky looked from ground level.

He rode on for a few more minutes and came to yet another stop sign. This time a tractor pulling several plastic tanks rolled in front of him. Once again, he noticed how terrible the smells became — acidic, even caustic, this time. Jack pondered where these chemicals were going and where they would end up. Were these the same chemicals that he had smelled earlier on the lawns in his neighborhood; they seemed to smell a bit differently? Wow, what large containers they were too. Perhaps, Jack thought, he should start investing his retirement monies in industrial chemicals since they seemed so ubiquitous. But wouldn't doing so only encourage their use?

So sitting under this gigantic wooden climax of ecological succession, Jack realized how important the decision to ride his bike had become especially given how trivial it seemed at the time he made it. Jack longed to ride his bike again, this time in a different direction. And, as he sat there envisioning his next trip, lo and behold, a solitary biker, coming from the other direction, stopped, dropped her kickstand, and began walking in Jack's direction.

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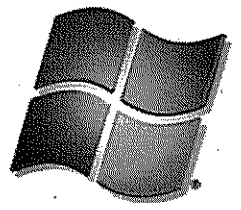
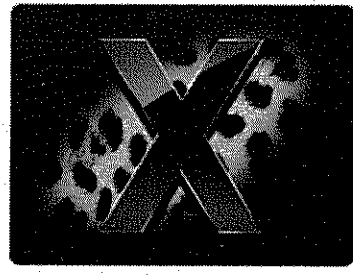
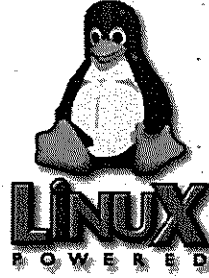
Well Microsoft has finally released the long anticipated and much hyped Windows Vista operating system. When this software was released to the general public three weeks ago Microsoft and its founder Bill Gates said there was only one word to describe the new OS, "wow!" I'm afraid I must disagree with Mr. Gates on this assessment as I find the delivered product to be a big yawn. Apparently I am not the only one to feel this way. Despite massive positive blather by the many computer magazines (that depend upon Microsoft for ad revenue and fear retribution for reporting honestly that Vista amounts to little more than expensive and resource squandering eye-candy) so far sales of MS Vista have been well below projections.

If you have already made the leap to Vista I hope you enjoy your adventure and highly recommend that you shell out for the additional memory before going nuts over Vista's performance. For those who haven't yet made the decision but are contemplating either buying a new computer or upgrading an existing computer please allow me to offer you some advice.

First, if your existing computer is more than a year or two old forget about the option to upgrade to Vista. If that older computer runs Windows XP well enough for your needs and you are satisfied with it just ignore the hype and continue using what you have. If your existing computer is new or relatively new but has an Intel Celeron processor or an Intel Pentium 4 less than 3.0 gigahertz or any AMD processor slower than the Athlon XP or Sempron 3000+ Vista is not a realistic option. Do not let someone talk you into replacing that processor — that's a sucker's move. Instead stay with Windows XP and consider investing in some more memory (especially if you have 512 megabytes or less of random access memory) or a better video card for a performance boost and to get at least another year or two out of that computer (you will thank me). Regardless of what you have read there is nothing wrong with Windows XP that Vista will magically fix. At this point in its lifecycle Windows XP still has lots of useful life left despite its imperfections and warts.

Second, if you are in the above group hardware-wise but have already grown sick and tired of Microsoft and Windows you do have alternatives. Most people use their computer to do basic word processing, spreadsheets, browse the Internet, send and receive e-mail, store and manipulate digital pictures or music and play simple, non-demanding games. If this description fits you there is an alternative most never consider, chuck Windows and blow raspberries at Microsoft by adopting a variation of Linux. Linux is a totally different operating system based on the concepts originated in Unix, one of the most stable and long-lived operating systems around.

Unlike Microsoft products Linux systems almost never crash and many operate for years without requiring a reboot. That's why Linux is the choice of many who operate computer servers such as those that host web pages or e-mail servers across the Internet. While Microsoft has heralded improvements in security as one of the "wow" features in Vista the fact is no version of Windows can hold a candle to any version of Unix or Linux in terms of security. Viruses and spyware are Windows plagues and virtual non-issues in any other operating system including Linux and Apple's Mac OS X (which itself is built upon a variant of Unix!). While Linux isn't typically sold at your nearby discount store that doesn't mean Linux is hard to get. In fact, Linux is available totally free for the asking and you can install your copy on as many computers



Windows Vista™

as you wish without piracy concerns.

As an operating system there is no version of Windows than can hold a candle to any modern Linux in terms of utility, stability, or the ability to multitask. And Linux has multiple graphics user interfaces from which you can choose your own favorite. And for those of us with perfectly good computers that just don't have the horsepower required to run Vista Linux is a sight for sore pocketbooks. Any computer that can run Windows XP can run Linux as well or better without the need for costly upgrades. Unlike most other operating systems Linux is more of a tool chest. In addition to the expected operating system functionality Linux includes virtually all the other software programs you will need for no extra charge. If you have an Internet connection you can download even more software for Linux, most at no cost other than the Internet connection and your time.

Microsoft and other critics of Linux will tell you that as an Open Source product you cannot get the necessary support for the software that Microsoft offers. If you have ever actually tried to obtain support from Microsoft then you already know what a ludicrous statement this is. Unless you shell out big bucks to purchase a support agreement from Microsoft that company does almost nothing to support its users. Hell, Microsoft doesn't even provide basic documentation with Windows anymore. In contrast the user community surrounding Linux is very active and eager to assist users encountering problems provided you have an Internet connection and ask for help. Like most Microsoft products there are numerous third-party books available to assist you with Linux or the many application programs that are available for it. Compared to Windows there is relatively little you cannot do with Linux at little or no additional cost. People who try Linux with an open mind are nearly always amazed and impressed.

But you need not take my word for that. Get on-line and check out a web site for Ubuntu Linux (ubuntu.com). From this web site you can order a cd-rom copy of Ubuntu Linux absolutely free — and that includes free shipping! Ubuntu Linux is distributed on a Live CD that will let you try out Linux without the need to actually install it on your computer by merely booting off the Ubuntu cd-rom. The experience is similar to what you will encounter if you run the complete install of the Ubuntu system but since it runs off the cd-rom it will be a wee-bit slower.

Third, if your existing computer is older and has either Windows ME or Windows 98 as its operating system you really should be in the market for a new computer as upgrading is NOT a realistic option. Buying a new computer right now means that you will have a variety of operating system options to choose from. Of course there is the obvious option of buying a new computer with some version of Windows Vista installed. If you do your shopping at a big box store or buy a Dell or Gateway this will seem to be your only option, but that is a misperception. Being in the market for a new computer means that you can look beyond those obvious vendors. Unless you are a dedicated PC game player, or have

a huge investment in PC software that only works in Windows you too should be considering either Linux or Apple's new Macintosh computers.

The Apple Mac OS X is without a doubt a much better operating system than any version of Microsoft Windows ever released. As I noted earlier, the Mac OS X is based on Unix, BSD Unix to be precise. Apple has essentially created an elegant and eminently functional GUI for the tried and true, stable OS that does things right. Computer science classes could be taught using Windows as the counter example of how an operating system should be designed. Most of what Microsoft has tried to do with Vista is to bring the look and feel of the Mac OS X to a Window platform. While visually Microsoft succeeds somewhat a pig dressed up in finery remains just a pig.

The Mac OS X is about to undergo its own upgrade soon. The current version is known as Tiger and the new version will be Leopard. Apple is always tight-lipped about such things but there can be little doubt that an already impressive OS X will become even stronger. As an interesting aside I want to point out that ever since Apple switched to using Intel processors in its computers the Mac OS X has been nearly capable of running on standard PC hardware and could become a Vista killer if only Apple would choose to offer such a version of OS X in direct competition with Window Vista.

Apple's critics, including myself, have always complained about the lack of real user choice in hardware as well as the clearly higher prices charged for comparable Apple hardware versus PC hardware. These criticisms remain valid although Apple has reduced the pricing delta somewhat. Buying an Apple Macintosh computer will not be possible for the low, low advertised prices we have all become used to in the PC universe — but then again nobody should really be buying these poorly built and underpowered "value priced" PCs anyway. Buyers of such value PCs this past holiday season will no doubt discover that upgrading to Microsoft Vista is a painful process in most cases. If you are spending the money to buy a properly equipped Vista-ready PC the extra cost of going with an Apple Mac will be much less than you think.

I know that market forces being what they are lots of my customers will be using Vista machines and discovering that Microsoft still hasn't managed to get the OS right. They will still suffer from the inevitable system crashes, viruses, spyware and other malicious software that flourishes amidst Microsoft products. And I guess I should be grateful for the amount of work this means for my shop but my conscience demands that I recommend against jumping into the Vista pool. If you are buying a new computer give the Apple a good hard look and remember that for most people Linux offers a low-cost alternative that simply works better than Windows.

Mike Kroll operates "Dr. Mike Computer Therapist," a small computer repair shop in Galesburg, Illinois. You can e-mail him at: Dr.Mike@Bizconnect.net or stop by his shop to "Get Therapy" for your computer. Mike even continues to make house calls in his Mobile Therapy Unit!