

Meeting Halfway

Nathaniel Katz



Prologue

In the piece Meeting Halfway, my former student Lawrence and I set out to ride our bicycles from Yonkers, New York, where he is living and Providence, Rhode Island where I am attending graduate school in order meet at the halfway point. We chose as our destination the town of Middletown, Connecticut, which is approximately 90 miles away from either place. I asked Lawrence to ride his bicycle and meet me halfway, I asked him because I knew that he would say yes. He always used to say yes to everything that I requested when I was his teacher. And I wanted him to say yes again so that I could do this thing with him. We had not seen each other in a very long time. Last time I saw him he was still my student and I was his teacher. I think our relationship is different now because he is an adult and we don't have the limitations of the classroom to define the way that we talk to each other and the things that we do together. He is also now a working person, a bike messenger in New York. A bike messenger is something that I dreamt of doing when I was his age, but I didn't really have the guts to go through with it. I am now a student, I think it is interesting to meet Lawrence now that he is an adult and working and I am in school. Now I am more selfish (as a student) and don't have to worry about being responsible, and he is more responsible.

When Lawrence was my student he was irresponsible about school, he almost never came to class. Sometimes he would only come to school to visit with me. I guess that made me somewhat irresponsible for letting him do that, but I knew that otherwise he wouldn't be in school at all. In my classroom he was always responsible and he would do everything in his capacity to fulfill my expectations. I know that he looked up to me. Part of it was that he lacked a father, that is a simple explanation, but it is true to an extent. He lacked a father and I was as good a male role model as he could find. I tried to live up to that but I am not always so sure I did a very good job. In the end I left teaching, and left New York, and all of my students to be selfish and travel. Lawrence didn't finish high school, I don't know if he would have finished if I had stayed but I didn't stay and he didn't finish. I know that he isn't angry or disappointed with me, but I am disappointed with myself. Lawrence didn't finish high school and didn't go on to college the way that maybe as I had envisioned but he's doing something really cool with his life. He's living in a way that I admire but don't think that I could. I don't mean to romanticize his lifestyle, I'm sure that much of it has come out of necessity, but he made some choices that I think are great.

I think that in some way I may have had some influence on the life that he is living now. He probably feels that also, which is why he so quickly



Lawrence and his bicycle, 2007



Nathaniel and his bicycle (re-enactment), 2007

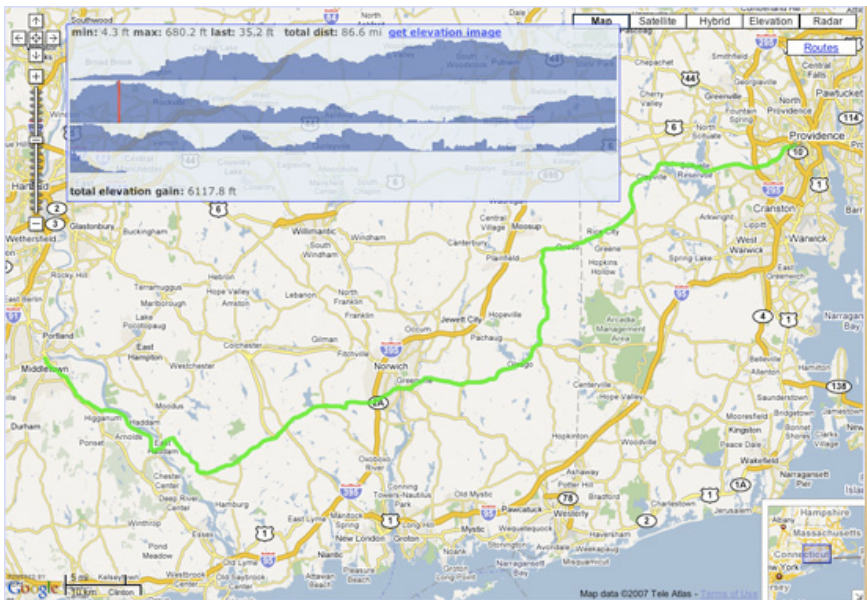
accepted my request to meet. I think that he also still has a desire to do what I want because he sees me in an authoritative and paternal role. That is okay with me though, I don't imagine that just because I no longer am his teacher that our entire relationship will change. I know that the roles and power relations that we first know someone in are the roles that we maintain regardless of how the relationship changes. Acknowledging that, meeting in a different place suggests a potential new relationship outside of the framework that we first came to know each other. It is also meant to mark, through an epic ride of 90 miles, the impact that we each had on the other's life; a monumental gesture executed to acknowledge the intimate.

In appreciation of who Lawrence has become and his willingness to go on the bicycle ride, I made him a gift. I would like to try to make him happy in the way that he would try to make me happy. I made a drawing of the two of us with our bicycles coming together. Under the drawing is a short text reading:

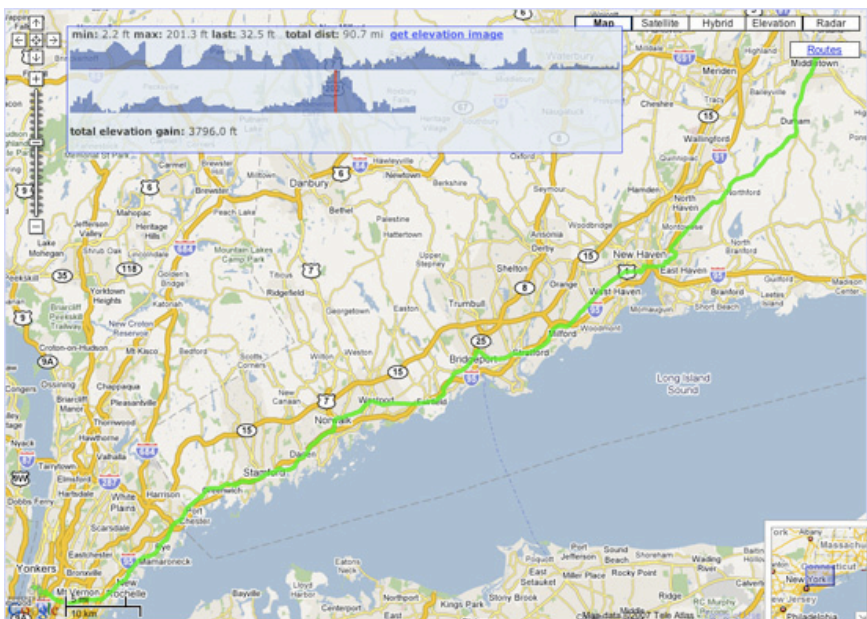
On November 4, 2007 Lawrence Quintana (Yonkers, NY) and Nathaniel Katz (Providence, RI) rode their bicycles approximately 90 miles each, in order to meet halfway in Middletown, CT. Through this ride they sought to redefine their relationship from that of student/teacher to a friendship.

Epilogue

Lawrence didn't make it the entire way to Middletown. In New Haven he decided to catch the train back to New York. He was still twenty miles away from our final destination. I hadn't really counted on Lawrence not making it all the way. I assumed it wouldn't be too difficult of a ride, as it is relatively flat coming up the coast from New York. I don't think he prepared properly, he was riding the wrong kind of bicycle, he probably didn't eat right, and he left too late in the day. A large part of this ride was about relinquishing responsibility and treating him as an equal adult. I didn't want to tell him what to do or how he should do things. I asked him to meet me, he said yes, and as far as I was concerned it was as far as I should go with exerting my influence. After all I am no longer his teacher and he is old enough to make responsible choices, why shouldn't he be able to handle such a ride on his own without me checking up on his preparation and planning? During the ride when it was becoming clear that he was not going to make



Providence, RI—Middletown, CT 86 miles



Yonkers, NY—Middletown, CT 90 miles

it before dark I tried to restrain myself from telling him to end his ride and go home from New Haven. I tried to suggest it without being assertive and he kept responding that he wanted to continue. At that point I just wanted to let him make his own decision, though I knew it would be impossible for him to make it all the way to Middletown. Eventually he did decide to catch the train from New Haven and I was glad for that, though sad that we didn't get to meet up. Unfortunately he had a really bad experience riding into New Haven, a couple of guys tried to rob his bike and while he was escaping he dropped his phone and it broke. I felt some guilt and responsibility for having asked him to go through with this. I was still playing a teacher role with him.

Nathaniel Katz 2008