

Finding a Reason to Ride

By John W. Fountain

Fuel “on.” Ignition key turned. Gear in neutral. Engine to run position. Squeeze the clutch. Start her up. Vroom!

Baby steps.

My instructors watch like drill sergeants as I motor around the course on a cool sunny morning, slowing at turns, then turning my head in the direction of the turn and accelerating—my entire being gripped with concentration and also a little exhilaration.

It is all in a day’s work. Actually, it amounts to a blizzard of instructions, safety tips and experience absorbed one morning of a weeklong class at the Motorcycle Riding Program administered through the Illinois Department of Transportation Division of Traffic Safety. A class that could end up saving my life as I take on this latest venture: motorcycle riding.

Yes, at 51, I have decided to take up motorcycle riding, drawn partly by that aura of freedom that seems to surround some motorcyclists I have witnessed breezing over the countryside or across the interstate—destination unknown—free spirits, riding on a Harley, the wind in their hair, the glint of the sun kissing their chrome, the raw power at hand.

Did I mention the riding gear? Black leather—boots and jacket. Shades. Who wouldn’t want to ride?

I haven’t always wanted to. At least that is the lie I told myself.

And I figured that surviving the ‘hood was adrenaline enough. Besides, I have never been a risk taker, especially when it comes to potentially parting with life or limb. So, whatever my fascination, I never allowed the thought of motorcycle riding to take hold.

It didn’t hurt my anti-motorcycle riding sentiment when years ago on a West Side avenue I saw what can happen when a motorcyclist goes splat. It isn’t pretty. And I have an aversion to spilling my brains or blood all over the street.

So no matter how enticing motorcycle riding ever seemed, I could always find a more compelling reason to stick to four wheels, steel side panels, and front and rear bumpers.

Then something changed.

I can’t say for sure when, though I can say what—even if the first assumption of some who hear of my motorcycle-riding aspirations is that I must be on some vain quest to reclaim my youth.

“Are you having a midlife crisis?”

“Uh, no,” I reply with a chuckle. “Not a midlife crisis.”

At least not the kind some might think.

If it is a midlife crisis of sorts, it is born of the understanding that, as a friend once told me, “You get this thing called life and only so many things and so many people to fill it up with.”

That life, even when lived cautiously or carefully, can be taken in a moment. It was born of the knowledge that I don’t ever have to leave my house to encounter ill fate. That in the “safest” of places I am still always separated from death by just one breath.

I have chosen to ride because I realize we can spend so much time trying not to die that we never fully live.

How to accomplish that is up to us as individuals. For me, it is about living to see my children graduate college, living to walk my daughter down the wedding aisle, living to kiss and hold my grandchildren, living long enough to grow very old and gray, and also living to ride a glistening Harley—an orange-red sun setting in my face and a summer wind tickling my back.

So, for right now—for my family’s sake and mine—it’s baby steps.

Vroom!