

LONG ISLAND

After all these years I don't ride a bike, but I'm still on a roll**By Marcia Byalick**

Special to Newsday

Updated July 19, 2017 6:43 PM

I know of no behavioral demographic in which I'm part of a select 6 percent. No taste or trend or opinion or skill distinguishes me from everyone else in my immediate world, except one: I don't know how to ride a bike.

There's no sexy trauma to explain why, no horrific accident, no bullies on bikes stealing my lunch money. It just never happened. I would say East Flatbush was a bike-unfriendly neighborhood, but my friend Susan, who lived a few doors down from me, has no such recollection. I am without memories of skinned knees and the thrill of that first real freedom. Learning to ride was on my 20-before-20 list and 30-before-30 list along with other out-of-my-comfort-zone activities — like driving cross-country and learning to make pasta from scratch. But the satisfaction of finally having tamed the wild-gear-ed stallion of a two-wheeler never came to be.

Once you miss that window in childhood when every kid learns to ride, with an adult holding on to the back of the bike to help you balance, it gets complicated. Rationally, I understood it's never too late to learn.

Friends tried to be helpful. They explained it's a muscle memory thing, all motor skills and training your body to respond without thinking about it. But by the time I could vote or drive or buy a drink, nerve-racking visions of hitting the concrete face first began to surface. Not to mention learning in public with my fragile ego out in the open for all to see.

As years passed, I envied those experiencing the sensation of wind whooshing in their face as the world flew by. It looked like such a joyful mind-body workout. They had the freedom to explore and pay attention and truly appreciate where they were and where they were going. When we traveled into the city, I wondered what it felt like to glide through a metropolis on the most energy-efficient vehicle ever created.

Accompanying jealousy were pangs of embarrassment and incompetence. I watched videos of adults learning to ride later in life. Once, I had my husband try to teach me. "The difference between the impossible and the possible lies in a person's determination." That's what Tommy Lasorda told the Dodgers for decades. Not always true, Mr. Lasorda.

I couldn't find my balance even though I did exactly as instructed — left foot on the ground, push down on the right pedal, and lean forward. Before I could find the second pedal, I was already tipping over. When I miraculously got both feet up, I went just a few feet before putting them down again. I soon hopped off and gave up. The fear of falling, plus the frustration of failure, got to me. The wobbling reminded me how little tolerance I have for turbulence when I'm flying. I blamed my lack of success on my lack of balance. But today with the wisdom that comes with age, I realize it was my self-doubt and the certainty I was part of the exception when it came to the cycling culture that led to my never being successful.

I'm not in favor of bucket lists — enumerating all my as-yet-unattained goals is too much pressure. But even if I felt differently, riding a bike would no longer be among the experiences I expect to achieve. The odds are small that skidding and wiping out and crashing will do serious damage — when you're 9 years old. But now . . .

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Albert Einstein said, "It is the same with people as it is with riding a bike. Only when moving can one comfortably maintain one's balance." That makes sense, so I do keep moving. For the past 16 years, I spin. Four times a week. I close my eyes, remove myself from the darkened room and cover 15-20 miles. Being a person who writes, my imagination is ready to rock and roll. And most days, it's almost, as they say, like riding a bike.

Marcia Byalick,*Searingtown*

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The scenic farms and sharp cheddar of a Vermont vacation

BY VERMONT / CABOT

For Long Islanders looking for a convenient getaway that's close by – but feels as an escape – head to the Green Mountain State. Travel scenic roadways to picturesque towns, artisan...

LIFESTYLE / RETIREMENT**In a cellular world, are we all just phoning it in?**

Rotary dial telephones shared only one basic function with today's mobile devices, promoting communication that's become rarer today. Photo Credit: AP / Dan Hardy

By Marcia Byalick

Special to Newsday

September 27, 2016 4:32 PM

Remember the old AT&T slogan, “Reach out and touch someone”? Well, my phone rang five times today and the only people interested in touching me were telemarketing for three charities, a political campaign and a real estate company.

Conversely, I made three calls, all fulfilling responsibilities — returning a call to an elderly aunt, checking on a sick neighbor and offering empathy to a friend having a tough time. Suddenly I realized that if you aren't ill or unhappy, you probably won't be hearing from me, at least by phone.

It wasn't always the case. So familiar still are the memories of the s-l-o-w process of rotary dialing to enter a number, the sensation of returning the handset to the cradle to end the call, the tangle of stretched-out cord to allow for some privacy.

There was a time when people didn't want their words overheard — remember those claustrophobic phone booths? And calling after 11 p.m. because the rates were lower? And asking for yourself when you arrived so loved ones would know you had traveled safely?

Not so long ago, making phone calls was a quiet, metered, intimate activity. So what happened to long, delicious catch-up calls? The conversations where meaning lies not just in what I said or the exact words I choose, but in the inside-of-the-ear intimacy, complete with cackles and snorts and sighs and deep thoughts.

Two thumbs tapping has replaced two ears listening for most everyone’s communication needs. According to Vanity Fair, the number six thing people do with their cellphones is make a call. Number six! After texting and Googling and social media and directions and taking pictures. My own daughter can’t be bothered to leave a message if I’m not home when she calls. Waste of time, she says. “You can see that I called so call me back.”

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I read recently that when author Siddhartha Mukherjee receives an invitation he cannot accept, he

sends a text: Apologies. Unable.

I get that he’s an insanely busy man. And that men love texting because audible words require effort, connection and sharing. Not their strong suit. But isn’t that response as rude as it is curt? Yet saying that, I find that I, too, lack the social graces I once had. I send emails way more than investing the time to verbally respond. Prime time to devote to a conversation is different for everyone. And if you call at the wrong time, it’s intrusive. I won’t ever phone a friend on her cell just to chat, assuming I’m interrupting her day, and she feels as I do that unless I’m home – not at the gym or in the car or in a store – I’m not focused enough to pay enough attention to her words. And like my dinner reservations, last call for a welcome conversation has moved up a few hours to early evening.

Am I too lazy? Too busy? Too tired? Too impatient to visit heart-to-heart by phone? My friends are certainly no less important to me than they’ve ever been. Several of them feel similarly, which makes me feel that maybe it’s that at this stage of our lives we use short calls, texts, and emails to make more frequent face-to-face plans. We might live in a different age but our affirming, challenging, loving, restorative chats, warmer and more honest than any email or text, are not quite vestigial yet.

By Marcia Byalick
Special to Newsday

LONG ISLAND**My Turn: Cleaning out memories, though they stay with us**

Marcia Byalick of Searingtown condensed many photo albums into one as part of her effort to get rid of stuff collected over the years. Photo Credit: Karen Gelb

By Marcia Byalick

Special to Newsday

September 6, 2017 6:57 PM

I spent the last two weeks cleaning out the basement. Going through years of sawdust-covered boxes and lumpy, tattered garbage bags containing old electronics, paperbacks, journals, and photos. Forty years worth of mildewed documents marking my life . . . images, report cards, news clippings, letters from friends.

Encouraged by the decluttering movement that preaches divesting all that no longer brings you pleasure and aware that this most procrastinated of jobs was mine alone, I decided it was time to make my way down to the belly of family memory.

I bagged up the easy stuff first, the things we no longer had the equipment to access — floppy disks and mixed tapes, DVDs and cables replaced by Apple's ever-evolving ports and plugs. Then I attacked the first shoe box full of cards and letters. Unexpectedly mowed down by a truckload of nostalgia, my pace slowed. Decades of intimate communication demanded I make a conscious decision about their future. I flip-flopped between melancholy and delight as I sifted through my personal archives. For the first time in my life, I felt the weight of the years I have lived.

The transcript of my college grades. (I don't remember that many C's.) Postage-size photos of high school friends; and my third-grade class in 1969. Amazing letters dated 1972 from my friend, describing the year she spent in Vietnam with her reporter boyfriend. Menus from a dozen holidays and celebrations where I fed those I love the most what should have been illegal amounts of salt and sugar. Travel journals containing more complaints of being tired and full than any recollections worth preserving. Daily planners, Playbills, Life magazines — all thrown out. out. out.

Then onto the photo albums. Like books on shelves or bikes in the garage, photos in never-looked-at albums don't do anyone any good. I grew up believing there was a certain hell in store for a person who would choose to throw out or destroy a photograph. But I was on a mission. If they were photos without people, out they went. If they were photos of people whose names I no longer remember, out they went. If there were a dozen photos of one party, two remain. I painstakingly curated 10 albums into one.

I found a questionnaire I filled out for someone's Ph.D. dissertation when I was in college. It was a trait evaluation index where you rated yourself on various personality characteristics and then answered questions that revealed how accurate you were. I smiled to see I rated high on good naturedness, open mindedness and organizational skills. Then my heart sank when I read my 18-year-old self scored in the lowest percentile in independence and self-confidence. In a flash, I remembered the girl I was and wished I could have reassured her that one day soon she would grow a pair.

Even as I dragged garbage bag after garbage bag to the curb, I was keeping way more than my daughters will ever be interested in. They live their lives digitally, and if it can't be stored on a flash drive or a disc, they probably won't keep it around.

Every friend I know who undertook cleaning out her attic or garage or cellar or basement did so under duress because of life changes, whether sudden or planned. Stressful times are not ideal for a task so overwhelming and exhausting, one that asks you to refocus on the experiences and surprises you will inevitably unearth. There also are life lessons to be learned that make the effort worth prioritizing. I realized that if an object's only claim to fame was that it predated Elvis' death, that wasn't enough reason to keep it. Holding onto something just for sentimental reasons (the 50-year-old matches from my wedding) can weigh you down.

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I always knew in my head, not so much in my heart, that our memories are within us, not within our things. Parting with almost 75 percent of my cherished, long-hidden stuff was so difficult because I was afraid if I got rid of something, I'd miss it. I know now I won't miss what I shed. I collected and preserved each piled crate of memories just for the day last week when I reconnected with my geologic past. And found I was humbled by the emotional richness of the life

I have led so far.

Marcia Byalick,

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By Marcia Byalick
Special to Newsday

NEWS

My Turn: Florida doesn't sound so bad now



The view from Marcia Byalick's Hollywood, Florida, living room looking out over the Intracoastal. Photo Credit: Marcia Byalick

Updated April 14, 2016 1:36 PM

For the first 50 years of my life, whenever I thought about Florida, I pictured a Buick lumbering down Interstate 95 with its left blinker on, from Brooklyn to Boca. The soft occupants of the car, able in the 20th century to retire in their early 60s, were annoyingly referred to as “snowbirds,” or worse, “snowflakes.” They headed toward the land of hurricanes and hanging chads and alligators and coupons, where the state bird was the early bird and a good parking space had less to do with distance from the store than it did proximity to the shade.

When I visited my parents, I snickered at the “condo commandos” who talked way too much about how much they paid for their prescriptions and constantly complained about how chilly 70 degrees feels. I joked about the cars seemingly driven by headless people and winced at the bumper stickers decorated with decals proclaiming loyalty to the NRA and the Confederacy. Writer Cynthia Ozick had a friend in me when she said, “... the whole peninsula of Florida was weighed down with regret. Everyone had left behind a real life.”

But the years have shaken me out of my seat at the cynical kids table. Now, my husband and I spend a half dozen winter weeks in the apartment we inherited in Hollywood, Florida. While I don't foresee living there full time, I can no longer deny its virtues. The never-crowded beach where we sit in sand chairs with our feet in the mesmerizing water. Time — unscheduled and unhurried — to notice the sky, the wild changeable weather, the spectacular sunsets filling our living room window. Even the treat of grocery shopping in Publix, the beloved seemingly everywhere supermarket with its well-lit wide aisles and huge selection.

Growing older where you can spend much of the year outside is definitely life-enhancing. So are the tennis tournaments and card games and lectures and day trips I once passed judgment on. Not for me perhaps, but, for those enjoying them, they are the fruits earned from decades of less selfish times.

I don't believe my husband and I are wired for a life of 100 percent leisure, but I've been wrong before. Luckily, we have careers where age and experience and wisdom make us better at what we do. If we're blessed with good health, we can maintain our working life for as long as we want to. Yet suddenly bragging about working till 90 sounds arrogant. The idea is to make the most of each day, which may or may not include hard work. Even I, a list-making Type A, should allow that slowing down and sleeping till 8 a.m. are not signs of sloth. What's my problem? Am I trying to impress my uninformed younger self that baby boomers still rule the universe? Or my children that I am still relevant?

What I've recently figured out is that there is almost another generation between my parents and me. Time enough to carefully plan, without trepidation or fear, the next stage of my life. And if I am lucky, I can relax into warming my bones in Florida the same way I enter the cold ocean water — slowly. I can work on a plan for growing older without growing old. I can see the value of days spent producing nothing more than an appreciation for a life spent well enough to get me to this place. I can lose the attitude.

For now I enviously admire the healthy body image the women on the beach — a surprisingly cosmopolitan mix of Canadians, Europeans and South Americans — exhibit in their two-piece bathing suits. I go to dinner in exotic Miami, which one of our neighbors calls Northern Cuba. And visit lifelong friends, happy campers relocated a bit farther north. Yet tipping my hat to my impatient New York DNA, I still roll my eyes at the DWO (driving while old) putting on his right signal five miles before he turns.

Marcia Byalick,

Searingtown

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LONG ISLAND**My Turn: Take heed if you're schlepping around a 'portable safe'**

A lost wallet was a nightmare-come-true for Marcia Byalick of Searingtown.

By Marcia Byalick, Searingtown

June 29, 2018 11:37 AM

Cash, credit cards and beloved photographs. Health, home and car insurance cards. Driver's license, loyalty cards and gift cards. Retail cards, library card and important receipts. Business cards and doctor appointment reminder cards. And for absolutely no reason, my checkbook and register. All these things and more were in my wallet when it vanished recently at the Fort Lauderdale airport.

And since then, I've spent days and days painstakingly trying to recreate what filled the "portable safe" I carried with me that day. Pick up your own wallet. Marvel at how big and fat it is. Then ask yourself, "How will I feel if I lose it?"

Over the years, I've had at least three dreams in which my wallet was stolen. Each time I awoke sweating, heart pounding. Oh, the horror! I finally heeded the subconscious warning fueling these nightmares when I got a new wallet a few years ago. And I whittled down its contents considerably. But like a garden, it needed frequent weeding if it was to stay under control. Within a month it regrew, bulging and chaotic.

Losing your wallet seems a rite of passage almost everyone has endured. By some estimates 1,000 wallets are lost or stolen every two minutes in the United States, just under 300,000 a year. A London study found that one in five lost wallets were returned, although three out of five people said they'd return a wallet they found. Half lost in a museum were returned — none lost in cafes or on public transportation. What does that say?

My grandmother's wallet was a change purse with cash, subway tokens and Medicare card. My mother's had cash, one credit card, her driver's license, her health insurance card and a picture of her grandchildren. One daughter has a small wallet with a just a few cards. The other doesn't own a wallet, using her phone case to hold a credit card, a Metro card, her driver's license and her health insurance card. Apple Pay negates the need for much cash nowadays, and all photos are digital. It seems I was the only one who needed a survival kit, every slot and pocket filled to safely negotiate the wilderness of my life.

The moment I realized my wallet was gone, a wave of overwhelming stress nearly drowned me. In this age

somewhere. The reality of reconstructing normalcy rivaled my nightmares.

I had an important doctor's appointment the next day that had to be canceled because I had no identification. There was driving to the Department of Motor Vehicles without a license. And realizing I had no change for the meter at the Department of Social Security. Then closing my bank account with no idea how many checks were outstanding. I waited for new credit cards while figuring out exactly which paid what bills and subscription services; I created new passwords along the way when for some reason the one I had no longer worked. I experienced my first migraine in a decade.

If I had one word to describe the entire experience it would be "awful." I won't say tragic because I'm a grown-up acquainted with tragic, and I know the difference. But I was shocked at how unhinged the experience left me.

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I'm still preoccupied with why whoever found my wallet couldn't just take what they wanted and leave the rest at the lost-and-found. I'm still waiting for the other shoe to drop — what else might have been in there that I haven't yet realized is gone? How many months before I can cancel the fraud alert?

And I'm still annoyed at myself for all the gift cards I never used, not to mention the free

cappuccinos I won't be drinking.

So pardon the sermonizing. Rather, consider this a public service announcement: Can you name everything in your wallet? Try right now. If you can't remember if something is in there, you probably shouldn't be schlepping it everywhere.

By Marcia Byalick, Searingtown