2017–2025

Thighs of Steel

Riding in solidarity with people on the move, 2017–2025



David Charles

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David Charles

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About this book

Thighs of Steel was a relay bike ride across Europe, from London and later Glasgow to Athens, raising money for projects run by refugees for refugees. Over its lifetime the riders raised more than £760,000.

David Charles first joined the ride in 2018, then became part of the core team that ran it. This book collects what he wrote about it in his blog and his weekly newsletter, from the first mention in 2017 to the goodbye in 2025. Other newsletter news from the same weeks has been left out.

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Thighs of Steel and Microdosing Psyence

1 May 2017

THEME: CHALLENGE ANNEKA



Life on the road.

Happy Friday! Sunday!

EXCUSES

Sorry for missing my own Friday deadline. In my defence, I was stuck on a MegaBus that decided to take a 110 minute detour through Slowsville. London Bank Holiday.

I've got a slightly different layout this week, divided into two main sections - ON THE ROAD and IN THE MIND. Let me know what you think. I'm hoping that it makes things more interesting for y'all. Love a little structure.

Without further...

ON THE ROAD

Remember last year, when I set off from London to cycle to Syria and only got as far as Vienna?*

Well, around the same time, the first Thighs of Steel rode all the way from London to Athens for charity. And they're doing it all again this year.

Earlier this week, I met Harri Symes, one of the organisers, over a couple of Old Rosy's in a Camberwell pub. It only confirmed what I already knew: **This is Epic.**

Thighs of Steel raises money for Khora, a community centre in Athens run by local, refugee and visiting volunteers.

I don't have to tell you what a shit storm the war in Syria (and beyond) is creating. And since the Macedonia-Greek border was closed in March 2016, tens of thousands of refugees are stuck in Athens with little in the way of support.

As Khora's co-founder Liska says: 'Look at the reality all over Europe. People will be stuck here for a really, really long time.' Everybody needs a safe place for a hot meal and a friendly chat. Everybody needs a Khora.

Last year, the ride managed to raise £48,000 - enough to cover the rent on Khora's seven storey building. How wonderful!

What's even more wonderful is that I'll be riding with the guys tomorrow on their last training ride before Le Grand Depart on 14 May. Stay tuned (or hook up with their news channels IG / FB) for more info on how you can cheer them on their oily way. (Or just go straight on and sponsor the 80-odd cyclists!)
**I will be polishing that ride off this summer, leaving from Vienna sometime in early July.*

IN THE MIND

Over the last fifteen months, the idea of self-administered psychedelic microdoses has been getting more and more attention in the media.

So I was delighted to see Jim Fadiman and Sophia Korb present the results of their enquiry into microdosing (see the video below). Jim developed and popularised the standard psychedelic microdosing protocol, so yay. And now the Beckley Foundation and Imperial College London have announced the first ever scientific trial on the subject!

This is tremendous news for people who are self-administering psychedelics in this way, and for others who are interested, but understandably reluctant to try a dosing protocol for which there is no body of scientific support. Until now, there was just one abysmal study that seemed to show a risk of heart failure.

Despite decades of research demonstrating the extremely low toxicity of psychedelics, distortions in popular culture have clouded the picture. I'm looking forward to some clarity!

For those of you who don't have the time to watch Jim and Sophia's presentation (or read this excellent Vice write up), their research (based on self-reporting) seems to indicate that microdosing psychedelics can encourage positive mood in people with mild depression, but might make those with anxiety more anxious.

People without such pre-existing conditions can just enjoy the experience for a really good day - or "enhanced wellness".



James Fadiman and Sophia Korb present their results to MAPS. 1 hour viewing time, but you can listen without losing too much. If you just want Fadiman's mischievous "surprises", head straight for the last 10 minutes :)

POSITIVE CONSTRAINTS: AN UPDATE

A positive constraint is a conscious choice to restrict your behaviour in some way. Why? Because it's only by trying new modes of behaviour or exploring new environments that we learn. Besides, it's fun.

All games are bound by positive constraints - golf without the sticks is just a walk, Mouse Trap without the dice is just pest control.

NO EGO

I've just completed the first ten (free) lessons on Headspace. I won't be paying them any actual money, but those first ten x ten minutes were another refreshing toe-dip into a world of stillness.

One of my reasons for pursuing meditation is that the number one factor in whether a subject will have a "mystical-type experience" while using a

psychedelic is the degree to which that person can *surrender* to his or her experience.

And one of the possible ways of training this ability to surrender is through meditation. Another is giving in to good music, which sounds a lot more fun.

I started counselling training this week and was struck by how similar active listening is to meditation. Meditation is about gently bringing the mind back to the process when it's monkeying around. Active listening is about gently bringing the mind's attention back to whoever is speaking.

Our tutor introduced us to a list of 12 common blocks to listening. I do ALL of these. That doesn't mean I'm winning.

NO SHAMPOO

I haven't used shampoo for a couple of weeks. My hair doesn't stink. I use bicarbonate of soda (an alkaline) mixed with water to cleanse, and lemon juice (an acid) mixed with water to condition. It's been fascinating to learn what shampoo and conditioner actually are, how they work and why we need to use them - or not. I used this guide to transition.

NO PANTS

I did this once this week. A metal zip does not a pleasant five hour bus ride make.

All of us do these little experiments, you don't have to call them positive constraints, but it'd be interesting to hear how you're messing around with remoulding your behaviour.

Cycling to Syria - back in the saddle!

27 April 2018



Happy Friday!

In 2016 I embarked on the somewhat ambitious target of cycling from London to Syria, reporting on the refugee 'crisis' from the saddle of my bicycle. In 46 days, I got as far as Vienna, before rushing back to work on Foiled at the Edinburgh Festival. It was a busy summer!

I always said that I'd carry on the cycle some day. Well, some day has arrived.

As I mentioned last week, this August I'm joining up with the Thighs of Steel crew to cycle two legs of their seven-legged ride from London to Athens. My thighs will be steeling the mountains and forests of the Balkans from Ljubliana, through Hungary and Romania, to Sofia in Bulgaria.

Thighs of Steel is an epic annual ride that raises £50,000 for a refugee community project in Athens, Khora. It's a pretty spectacular undertaking, made all the more spectacular for the fact that this will be its third consecutive year.

Most people - myself included - struggle to ride so far just once in their lives, let alone every year.

As you may have noticed, however, Sofia in Bulgaria is not Syria. Well spotted. This is where the logistics get interesting.

The second series of Foiled is being recorded over my birthday weekend at the end of June, so I could go out cycling in July before Thighs of Steel. I could, in effect, do the second half of my London-Syria cycle backwards, cycling from Sofia to Syria before looping back to Ljubliana to fill in the missing segment.

That would be silly.

Another option is to take a bus out to Italy, cycle 1000km the length of Italy, before picking up ferries over to Greece and thence to the Aegean islands and Turkey. To me this seems to make a little more sense, for no better reason that gelato. But also from a story point of view I'd like to see the impact of migrations from North Africa that are landing in Italy and Sicily, as well as the migrations from Syria and points east.

Wherever I eventually decide to ride (and time is running short, and the bus places filling up) I hope you'll join me on my little adventure and follow the stories I uncover and share along the way.

The 1600km ride from London to Vienna in 2016 was a very physical way to learn about the crisis of European leadership, the courage of refugees and the welcoming heroism of communities from Belgium to Bavaria. Here's to more of the same!

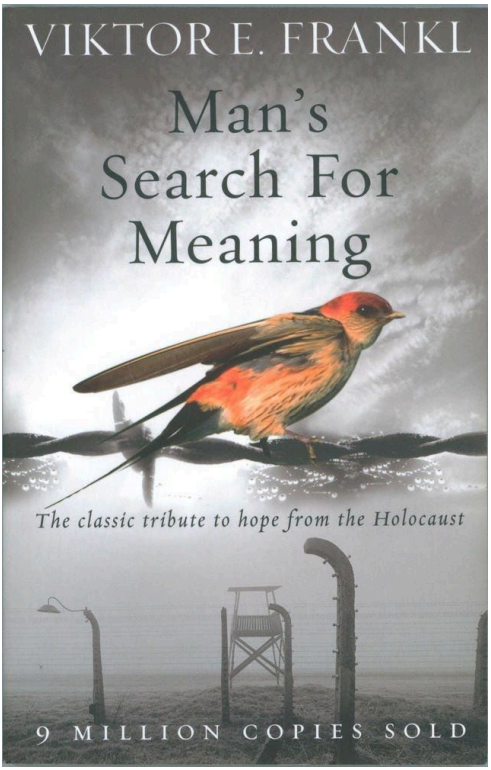
PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

This newsletter goes out to 118 beautiful people every week.

If you'd rather not receive it - and that's cool, I unsubscribe from cleverer, funnier mailing lists *all* the time - let me know or simply hit the self-destruct

button below.

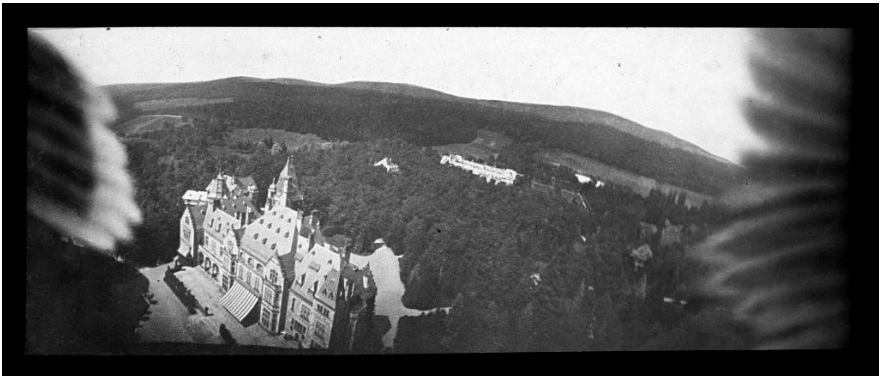
SELF-DESTRUCT THIS EMAIL



If you still haven't read *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl, then you're really wasting your time. Whatever it is that you think you're doing with your life - that's great. But find time for these 154 pages.

Or in the words of one dear friend:

"Breathtakingly moving and inspiring. Thank you so much for sharing. How is this not part of all school curriculums?"



It's an aeriel photograph from the early 20th century - taken by a bird! Via Kottke.org

OUTPUT >>

As you may have noticed, this mailing list is the engine room of my blogging. Here's some you might have missed:

1. It's a wonderful life - isn't it? (April)
2. The Foiled Diaries: Everyone Needs an Arcot (April)
3. The Only Serious Question of Philosophy (April)
4. Look after the weirdos and delete everything (April)
5. Victor Frankl and Man's Search for Meaning (March)

...COMING UP...

- More Psychedelic Breathwork on Monday
- Wednesday is the Champions League, obviously
- Table tennis with refugees at Young Roots on Thursday
- Loads and loads of Foiled writing as that famous whooshing sound gets louder

LIKE WHAT YOU SEE?

If you enjoy reading these weekly newsletters, then you probably know someone else who would too.

I made a button for that as well.

SHARE WITH A FRIEND

Have excellent weekends, one and all - and try to find time for a felafel.

Much love,
- dc

Steely Thighs and the BWOML

11 May 2018



Happy Friday!

Machynlleth Comedy Festival. Next year. Go.

Mind you, it probably wouldn't have been nearly as much fun if there hadn't been a heatwave. Or, indeed, if there had been sufficient public transport for the thousands of festival goers who, come midnight, stampeded the entire cavalcade of hackney carriages in Western Wales (about 5).

Other highlights included the contortionist comedy of Jordan Brookes, the thousand faces of Adam Scott-Rowley, and, naturellement, The Leak with Foiled producer Tom Price, James Acaster, Kiri Pritchard-Mclean and the ghost of Tom Allen. Oh and some jokes by me and Beth.

But that's the past! What's coming up? I hear you bawl.

Well, as trailed previously this summer I'm cycling 1,500km from Ljubliana to

Sofia with a bunch of similarly foolish cranks. As two legs of the Thighs of Steel ride, we're all raising money for Khora, a spectacularly worthwhile cooperative community centre for refugees in Athens.

There are tens of thousands of refugees stranded in Greece and it falls largely on the shoulders of citizen initiatives like Khora to support these stateless people.

I've written an awful lot of words about refugees and migration in the past, but there's a risk of overcomplicating matters.

I have been lucky enough to travel through Central, Southern and Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, the Far East and the Americas. I have never encountered anything less than open-hearted hospitality.

This is the way I would love to be treated; this is the way I would love everyone to be treated. Khora do this work, in a country where it is most pressingly needed.

If you want to contribute some of your hard-earned to this cause, then you will have my undying gratitude.

Thanks to a generous donation from Dave Charms, we're already 53% of the way towards raising my target of £1,000 and every penny goes straight to the library, language centre, kitchen, legal advice centre, music school and roof garden of Khora.

If you'd rather not, then that's fine too. We all have our own concerns and cares. I'm just grateful that I can share mine with you here and I hope you enjoy my stories of the cycle this summer. I truly appreciate your eyeballs!

Thank you!

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

This newsletter goes out to 106 beautiful people every week. (I deleted 12 people who hadn't opened the email in over a year last week. Ruthless.)

If you'd rather not receive it - and that's cool, I unsubscribe from cleverer, funnier mailing lists *all* the time - let me know or simply hit the self-destruct button below.

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As you may have noticed, this mailing list is the engine room of my blogging. Here's some you might have missed:

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2. Cycling to Syria – Back in the Saddle! (April)
3. It's a wonderful life - isn't it? (April)
4. The Foiled Diaries: Everyone Needs an Arcot (April)
5. The Only Serious Question of Philosophy (April)

...COMING UP...

After last weekend was officially anointed 'The Best Weekend Of My Life' (BWOML), this one has an awful lot up with which to live...

- EUROVISION on Saturday.
- The very first Bike Project Social Cycle on Sunday. Hopefully we'll do something bigger and better for UN World Bicycle Day on the 3rd of June. Save the date?
- Loads more Foiled all of the time.
- A dog.

From Falafel to Slovenia

10 August 2018



Happy Friday!

I left you last week on something of a cliff hanger. I was just about to make my first foray into Diavata refugee camp, a short drive northwest of Thessaloniki.

Since that first trip, I have returned Diavata another few times, and visited two other camps around Thessaloniki for good measure.

Our guide and translator was a Syrian engineer I'll call Abu Falafel. The first time I met him was at the house he'd been allocated by the ministry on the outer ring of Thessaloniki. It was on the ground floor of a unspectacular apartment building and he shared it with his youngest son, who is deaf.

Abu Falafel started, as all Syrians do, by ignoring our protestations that a second lunch would be unnecessary. He'd gone to so much trouble already, prepping ingredients, that we gladly acquiesced.

And so began the theatre of falafel that would give him his name.

Together we made not just falafel, those sizzling nuggets of protein, but also mutabbel, an aubergine foodstuff of a category that in English goes by the insufficient nomenclature of 'dip'. We need new words: meze is better. Hummus, babaghanoush, mutabbel, muhammara - these deserve better than 'dip'. They are the foundation of a meal, a far cry from the sauces that we use to flavour crisps, should we be so inclined.

Anyway, I digress heinously.

Abu Falafel, having filled the table with so many dishes that we had trouble squeezing ourselves in, defrosted sheaves of Syrian bread carted all the way from Athens. There are no bakers nearby that Abu Falafel can trust with the food Egyptians at least call 'aysh - life.

We eat Arab style, from communal plates in the middle of the table, scooping up falafel, mutabbel and hummus with torn bread. One of our number remarks that it's very different from the Western European style of demarcation and defence. *My plate is my castle and, once I have been served, woe betide any diner who dips into my dinner.*

Another reports a rumour that in certain high class German restaurants, guests will be requested never to return if they are seen sharing their food with their companions.

Abu Falafel tells us that everyone in Syria eats like this. Lunch at the oil company where he used to work was a sociable affair. Perhaps each might have their own bowl of fuul, if that was the dish, the sloppy nature of the beans making it somewhat difficult to convey in safety while reaching over a table - but in the main, there were a string of dishes in the centre and one shared equally with one's friends and enemies.

The conversation reminded me of a Frenchman I met in Athens. He'd complained that, while he didn't miss much about France, the one thing he did

miss here was a convivial lunch. In Greece, he said, all his colleagues grabbed something on the go - here he paused to sneer at what passed for cuisine - and harried back to their desks to eat there, grateful to have a job at all.

It left no time for the small talk that builds friendships, he said.

Sharing food requires at the very least negotiation and a sense of equality. There's not much room for greed on a shared table. Maybe that's why we've drifted away from those habits in Western Europe.

But I digress obnoxiously.

When Abu Falafel had filled us to the point where doing anything other than lying supine for an hour would be medically irresponsible, we left the house for Diavata camp... And you can read the rest of that story on my blog.



Tomorrow I meet up with the Thighs of Steel gang and on Sunday we start our cycle to Sofia in Bulgaria. So begins two weeks of *ridiculously* ambitious cycling, including about 6000m of elevation and about 130km a day. If you haven't already, now's the time to join us in supporting Khora with bear coin. Donors will be spared a whiff of my cycling shorts. The rest of you - I can't guarantee what you might find under your pillow one day ;)



Teddies stitched by some volunteers in the USA for Carry the Future. Very popular in the camp!

>> INPUT

1. Buddhists in love by Lisa Feldman Barrett (Aeon). Big fan of hers. She's written an essay about love. *Lovers crave intensity, Buddhists say craving causes suffering. Is it possible to be deeply in love yet truly detached?*
2. Asylum Seekers Become Shepherds in the Yorkshire Dales for a Day (Positive News)
3. Reply All in vast quantities. Particularly good episodes include: Shine on You Crazy Goldman (microdosing), The QAnon Code (conspiracy) and The Return of the Russian Passenger (cyber security).
4. 10 of the best words in the world (that don't translate into English) (The Guardian). A timely article, after learning that your vocabulary really can change the way you experience the world.

5. Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change (Kottke) 4. *Technological change is not additive; it is ecological. The consequences of technological change are always vast, often unpredictable and largely irreversible.*

OUTPUT >>

1. Diavata Camp, Thessaloniki (August)
2. How travel works on the mind (August)
3. Victor Frankl 5-a-Day Book Cult: Day 14 (August)
4. The Victor Frankl 5-a-Day Book Cult: Day 13 (July)
5. From Chios to Crisis (July)

...COMING UP...

- THIGHS OF STEEEEEEEL! I'll be cycling from Sunday to Friday, from Ljubljana to Timisoara in Romania. So fingers crossed I'll be writing from there this time next week.
- Everything's Puzzles, Episode 2 of *Foiled*, 18:30BST on Monday. This one's only got Miles Jupp all over it. Can't WAIT.



Catch up on Episode 1 here
Catch Episode 2 on Monday 18:30 BST on BBC iPlayer Radio

Heat Exhaustion, Stomach Bugs and Steely Thighs

18 August 2018



Happy Friday!

Apologies for the late arrival of this email - yesterday I was suffering from mild heat exhaustion and a stomach bug. It's quite hard to cycle in 30+ degrees heat while unable to eat or drink anything without getting stomach cramps.

But on with the show!

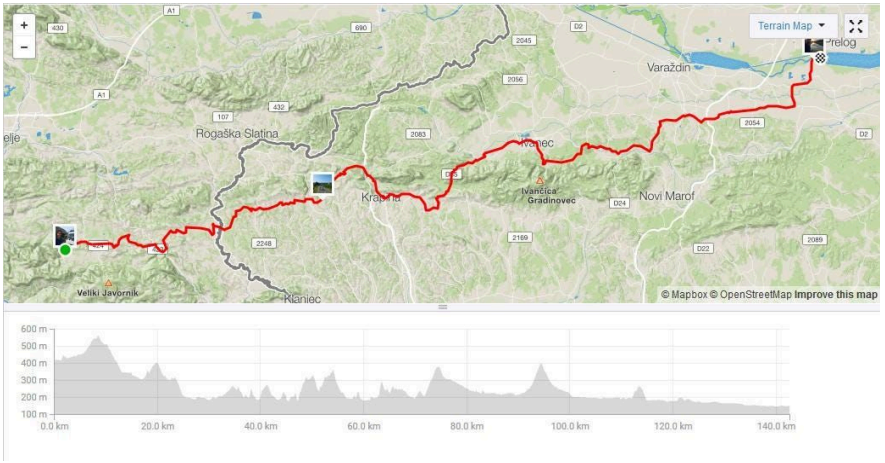
A Morning in the Life of a Steely Thighed Cyclist

0505: Wake up needing the toilet. Hold it in.
0515: Alarm. Switch off with eyes tightly shut.
0520: Open eyes. Stretch out back in child's pose on air mattress. Fantasise about a spa day. Search for glasses.

0525: Struggle into shorts from yesterday. They are damp. Start packing away unused sleeping bag. Keep searching for glasses.
0530: Pack away sleeping mat and other camping detritus in hope of finding glasses.
0535: Emerge from the tent into the morning dew. Wipe hands on grass and rub into face. Fetch shovel and biodegradable toilet paper from Calypso (the van) and find a suitable patch of ground for the morning constitutional. On the way back, make a cursory hunt for glasses.
0536: FIND GLASSES! Conclude that today will be a good day.
0540: Pull out the gas hobs to make porridge for 15 people with cinnamon, dates, nuts and banana.
0600: Eat sufficient porridge for the first 60km of cycling. Enough to make standing up uncomfortable and sitting down impossible.
0610: Throw bowl into a bucket for the wash up team. Jealously guard one's own titanium spork.
0615: Grab the shovel and biodegradeable toilet paper for, etc.. Realise that you've left your glasses somewhere. Conclude that today will be a complete horror show.
0620: Dismantle tent, shaking out the dew in a futile attempt to combat the overpowering smell of damp for tonight. Discover that, no matter which way you roll the flysheet, it mathematically cannot fit inside the bag. Resume hopeless search for glasses.
0630: Prepare bike for the day's ride. Discover a slow puncture, and fix same.
0635: Pull on a damp t-shirt, damp socks, damp shoes and damp cycling cap. Complete the look with a damp helmet and inappropriate prescription sunglasses.
0640: Fill pannier bag with last night's leftover dinner for lunch, hoping that it won't go fizzy by lunchtime (it will).
0641: FIND GLASSES! Conclude that today will be a good day, and that happiness is not found in life's vicissitudes, but in how you face them.
0645: Leave camp with a spring in your saddle for a 140km ride into the unknown...



Thanks SO MUCH to everyone who has put money into the Khora pot. Here's Strava proof of my steely thighed efforts - only another 6 days of cycling to go before Sofia! The small matter of the Carpathian Mountains coming up all too soon...



Day 2 of the ride: 142km with 2110m of climbing and 9h30 in the saddle. Tough, but beautiful (see below).



>> INPUT

1. Carbohydrates.
2. Water (insufficient quantities).
3. Trip in Bali, No Drugs Required (Playboy) A sensible article with a silly title about conscious breathing.
4. Peace in a Highland Bothy by Alastair Humphreys.
5. The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock by TS Eliot.

   Let us go then, you and I,
   When the evening is spread out against the sky
   Like a patient etherized upon a table

OUTPUT >>

1. The Victor Frankl 5-a-Day Book Cult: Day 15 (August)
2. Abu Falafel (August)
3. Diavata Camp, Thessaloniki (August)

4. How travel works on the mind (August)
5. Victor Frankl 5-a-Day Book Cult: Day 14 (August)

...COMING UP...

- A heck of a lot of cycling.
- Everything's Queues, Episode 3 of *Foiled*, 18:30BST on Monday. "New tickets for Boyzone Live have been released, and Sabrina is determined to be first in line. And she is. Apart from the 804 people in front of her."



Catch up on Episode 1 here
Catch up on Episode 2 here
Catch Episode 3 on Monday 18:30 BST on BBC iPlayer Radio

Thighs of Steel: Ljubljana to Sofia

25 August 2018



How do you sum up two weeks of doing almost nothing but cycling and refuelling?

We've cycled from Ljubljana in Slovenia, through the hills of Croatia, the plains of Hungary and the free ice creams of Romania to Sofia in Bulgaria. That's about 80 miles a day for 12 days, with one day off in the middle to stumble around Timisoara in a daze and eat.

Sitting here now, in the cool of the shade of a fig tree, it's time to wonder what will stay with me. Memories being what they are, what I write in the next 20 minutes may very well come to define my whole experience. So strap on your safety goggles and let's see what comes.

Thighs of Steel are an extraordinary collection of people. As their tagline says, they cycle really far and for good reason. The first half of that sentence should not be underestimated and the second cannot be overstated.

Even with my experience long distance touring – when cycling around Britain I averaged over 70 miles a day for two months straight – this trip was tough. The

days are relentless: from dawn to dusk we were solely focussed on delivering 100-140km of safe group riding.

Together we cycled 1,400km and climbed 14,000m of elevation over the course of about 78 hours in the saddle. No one was left behind and, thankfully (almost incredibly), there were no serious accidents.

We faced 34 degree heat (hello heat stroke) and rabid dogs (only one bite) as well as thunderstorms and sandstorms. Every day was a ride into the unknown and every wild camp spot was found with crossed fingers.

But it worked. And it didn't just work, it worked with good humour, patience and enormous generosity. Not only on the part of the indomitable core Thighs of Steel team and our fellow cyclists, but also from all the people we rode past along the way.

The Romanian kids who spent their pocket money to buy us all ice creams, the old woman in Hungary who passed us a huge bag of fresh plums, the countless doors that were opened so we could fill our bottomless water bottles, the man who gave us a watermelon, the mineral water factory owner who gave us free samples, the mayors who gave us permission to camp on football fields and on the grounds of a holy spring, the Slovenian family who let us pitch in their garden and welcomed us with a basket of fruit, the Bulgarians who taught us the words for 'water' and 'please'.

A journey like Thighs of Steel cannot possibly happen without stunning hospitality from those whose land we cycle through. After the third consecutive day of gifts of ice cream in rural Romania, we made a vow. Be more like them.

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As for the good reason, collectively the Thighs of Steel riders raise £50-80,000 to pay the rent and bills of Khora, a refugee community centre in Athens. No one wants to fundraise for a building: where's the glamour in that?

But without Thighs of Steel, Khora couldn't exist in bricks and mortar or serve with dignity a community of hundreds of refugees every day of the year.

That word, dignity, is important. One small example is the Khora policy that no one should have to queue for anything. At the cafe, refugees are seated, as they
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would be in a restaurant, and their meal is brought to their table. At the Free Shop, refugees make an appointment so they can pick up what they need in peace with only a few other ‘customers’.

It doesn’t sound like much, but for people who are used to interminable waits, it means a lot.

Thank you for your support and I look forward to finding new ways to share this with you all in the near future.

Why I travel slow, or “Delays? Really?”

31 August 2018



I’m a slow traveller. I’ve taken only one return flight in the last 8 years – and that was to prove to myself that I wasn’t not flying out of pride or habit.

So while the other Thighs of Steel cyclists packed up their bikes and drove out to Sofia airport for a three-hour flight home, I cycled down to the bus station for the first leg in a journey that took three days.

Sounds slow, right?

But ‘slow’ is a relative concept. Taking only 3 days to cross a continent is still pretty quick, when you think about it. The relentless wheel-turning of the Thighs of Steel crew took 5 weeks to make the journey from London to Sofia. If I’d walked, the 2400km hike might have taken 100 days.

One of my favourite bits of stand up is by disgraced comedian Louis CK (proof you can do gross things and still be funny). You can usually find it pirated online under the title ‘Everything is amazing and nobody’s happy’.

It’s really worth watching the whole thing, but this is the excerpt that’s pertinent to the experience of slow travel:

> People say there's delays on flights. Delays? Really? New York to California in 5 hours. That used to take 30 years – and a bunch of you would die on the way there, and have a baby. You'd be a whole different group of people by the time you got there!
>
> Now you watch a movie and you take a dump and you're home.

I didn't die, give birth or watch any movies on my transcontinental voyage, but I did take about 6 dumps en route home – and that's exactly as it should be.

Travelling the slow way meant that I could unwind my cycling legs, make new buddies during an 8-hour border crossing, browse the secondhand bookshops of Budapest, relax for a couple of hours in a hot spring spa, ride across the cycling paradise that is The Netherlands, shop for cheese in Den Haag, play two-truths-and-a-lie with fellow tourers on the ferry, and finally cadge a lift in a van heading west to home.

For me, that doesn't sound like a slow journey, and the 8-hour border crossing didn't feel like a delay. It's something else. It's something that I think is well worth the time and the money it costs me because it's something I enjoy far more than simply 'getting there'.

Thighs of Steel: A Community on Wheels

7 September 2018



Today is the final day of the epic seven week cycling relay fundraiser that is Thighs of Steel.

At about 5pm, the latest peloton of steely thighed cyclists will sweep into Athens, hot, sweaty and exultant after an 85km day's ride – the culmination of a journey that started 4,600km ago in London.

The bike ride, and the 80-odd riders thereon, have already smashed their target of raising £50,000 to pay the bills at refugee community centre Khora – and are pushing on to beat the record set last year of over £100,000.

These are the numbers. On the face of it, they sound very impressive. But, let's be honest, there are more efficient ways of raising money for charity.

A single fundraising soiree in the City of London could raise over a million pounds, and completely transform the operational capacity of Khora literally overnight. A bike ride is a painfully elaborate way of charity fundraising, no doubt.

Even the riders themselves are poorly chosen. My companions were teachers, counsellors, social entrepreneurs, itinerant festival workers. It wouldn't be hard to target a higher-earning bracket of cyclist and easily double or treble the fundraising target by tapping into a network with more money to give.

But that's not what the organisers have done, that's not what the organisers want to do, and that's not what the organisers have chosen.

They have deliberately decided on an inordinately long bike ride, they have deliberately targeted this motley demographic. None of this is an accident.

Thighs of Steel is not a fundraising machine powered by bikes. It is a community on wheels.

- What do you need when you get bitten by a potentially rabid dog in rural Romania?
- What do you need when you get nudged off the road by a van travelling at 50km/h?
- What do you need when you get heat stroke and spend the night throwing up?
- What do you need when you're feeling down and out, despondent and depressed?
- What do you need when you're trying to raise £1,000 for charity?
- What do you need when you get a puncture, fix a puncture, but can't get your tyre back on?
- What do you need when you've run out of water and you're riding in 36 degree heat?
- What do you need when faced with a 20km, 1000m climb, tougher and steeper than you've ever faced before?
- What do you need when you make camp on a beach and the wind turns it into a sandstorm?

Yeah, that's right: you need community.

It's no secret that I believe in the transcendent power of long, arduous – even pointless – journeys. One night in a City members' club might raise half a fortune, but one week of cycling through Eastern Europe will spin your life around and give it a shove in an unpredictable, but always interesting direction.

Beyond the fundraising, the real outcome of such a week is immeasurable. What will become of the hours of thoughts, ambitions and secrets we shared? What will become of the muscles and friendships we built?

- Shall we meet down the pub next week?
- Or plan another long ride together?
- And marry, before raising our kids on a farm?
- Will I start a new job in pastoral care?
- Or spend my days fixing bikes?
- And my nights throwing fundraising soirées?
- Will I spend the winter in Greece?
- Or perhaps rural Romania?
- And launch a rabies inoculation programme?

Cycling always creates plenty of space for upside down and inside out thoughts. Cycling *in a community* like Thighs of Steel adds camaraderie and caring, laughter and lectures, ideas, ideals, practical jokes, impractical jokes, cultures and creations.

My long journey back home is full of potential, and the promises and resolutions I make are easier to keep when I have a dozen new friends cheering me on.

Thighs of Steel is not just a bike ride, and it's not only a fundraiser. It's a community on wheels that, once built, can never be forgotten.

Happy Hundred!

26 October 2018



Happy Friday!

And welcome to the **100th weekly edition** of this newsletter! Firstly, I think this calls for a wonderful photo of a whale. You're welcome.

Secondly, thank you for reading, and continuing to be interested.

Thirdly, there are changes afoot that I think you'll enjoy.

I write this newsletter for a few different reasons, but one stands out: the writing keeps me honest.

Every Friday since December 2016 I have written a little something to you all,

and the discipline reminds me to pay attention to the universe, to the things I'm doing, to the books I'm reading, to the places I'm visiting, and to the people I meet.

As John McPhee may once have said: **'Writing is a way of being in the world.'**

So thank you for keeping me honest over the past 100 weeks.

But what about the future? Where will the next 100 Happy Fridays take us?

One area where I'd like to improve is focus. At the moment I simply write whatever is on my mind, or about whatever I've been doing that week. Sometimes I surprise myself with a good story, sometimes I disappoint myself.

For the next 100 episodes, I'd like my writing to be a little more focussed. To that end, I propose writing each month according to a theme, making a series of four (or five) newsletters that explore the nooks and crannies of some esoteric interest of mine - and hopefully yours.

Starting with Episode 101, our first month's focus will be on **Gifts**. What is a gift? What, why and how do we give? How does a gift make us feel? What is the relationship between gifts and money? And what the blue blazes am I going to do about Christmas?

That is all I have planned so far. **I am gloriously open to suggestions** - you are, after all, the ones reading this humble submission of mine.

What would you like to read more about? **Cycling? Comedy? Crap hostels?**

Please, if you have any special interests, send them over by replying to this email and I'll do my best to slot them in over the next 100 episodes.

Part of my motivation for making these themes monthly is that I hope we can turn this newsletter into more of a two-way thang.

With four (or five) weeks to develop a theme, your response to the first week can become the foundation for the second, and so forth, as we move forward together.

There are now over 120 intelligent and discerning humans subscribed to this newsletter and I just know you have thoughts and ideas that would knock mine into a cocked hat. I'd love to hear them.

So this week will be the last of my weekly rambles. There'll still be plenty of space for whimsy if the need arises, but from next week, I promise, things will become a little more focussed.

Thank you for your eye balls!

Thighs of Steel

The other big news this week is that I have now been officially anointed as High Priest of Promo for Thighs of Steel.

As you know if you've been paying attention to my weekly missives, Thighs are a wonderful collection of hugely inspirational human beings. These human beings are planning to expand the ride next year, and raise tens of thousands more for grassroots refugee community projects.

With more saddles to fill, they needed someone to take on responsibility of spreading the word. For their sins, they've asked me.

My job will be to make connections with other Adventure for Good people to try and reach cyclists who would be mad and glad enough to take on a Thighs of Steel saddle.

As I can fulsomely attest, the experience will be one of the most magical of your life. If you know of any humans who would be interested in becoming part of the

Thighs adventure story, please get in touch by replying to this email.

Ride easy!

Tame The Mane 💇

8 February 2019



Happy Friday!

Thighs of Steel

Last year, long time readers may remember, I cycled from Ljubljana to Sofia with Thighs of Steel, a community of not-so-serious cyclists doing some really serious cycling to raise money for a grassroots refugee centre in Athens.

Some of you beautiful people donated to the cause and, in total, we raised over £80,000.

Well, I have two pieces of news.

1) Khora's New Home

After a difficult year, Khora (the aforementioned community centre) are soon to open a new cafe space, providing a safe place to access good nutritious food as well as somewhere to relax and build community.

The refugee crisis is pretty much out of the news, but it's still a tough reality for the many thousands of people who've arrived in Athens.

The wait for an answer about their asylum claim can take years, leaving individuals and families in limbo, often without secure housing, the possibility of getting a job, and without money or facilities to cook healthy food.

Thighs of Steel 2018 raised enough to pay the rent and bills (all the boring stuff) for this new cafe for a whole year. The world's not quite sorted yet, but your help made this amazing project possible!

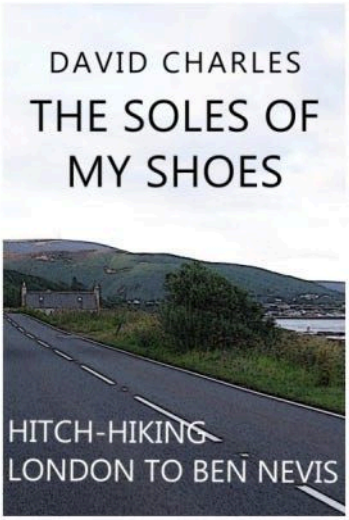
2) Dave's New Job

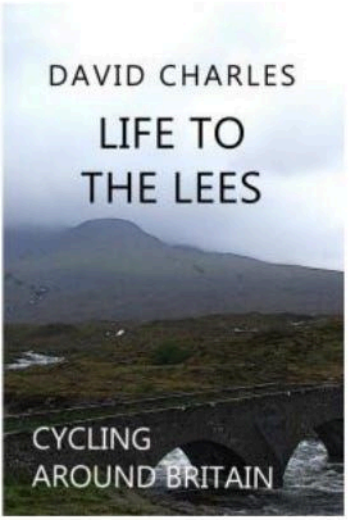
On Wednesday, the Thighs of Steel organisers invited me to join the Inner Thighs and be a part of the core team for the last 3 weeks of the ride this year, between the classical capitals of Rome and Athens.

I'll be cycling over 1,700km, climbing over 23,000m, fixing punctures in 4 different countries, setting up wild campsites on Croatian beaches and in Albanian forests, driving the fabled Calypso through mountain passes, and cooking many fat meals for dozens of ravenous cyclists.

I'll try not to get heat stroke this time.

If you fancy joining me, applications open for London-Athens at the end of March. Follow Thighs on Facebook, Instagram or join their mailing list for updates, training rides, and the booking form when the fateful moment arrives.





I've published 5 books, including stories of hitch-hiking from London to Ben Nevis, and cycling 4,110 miles around Britain. Visit my tiny book shop.

The ebooks are Pay What You Want, so you choose the price tag. Can't say fairer than that.



This morning, my friend and fellow round Britain cyclist Anna Hughes launched an ambitious campaign to find 100,000 other souls who can pledge to make 2020 a flight free year.

After 8 years of (almost) no flying, I was delighted to tell my No Aeroplanes story on the Flight Free blog.

I love travelling almost as much as I love writing you this newsletter, but I have never loved travel more than since I gave up those cigar-shaped metal things that fly through the air.

Try it?

Right! I'm off to finish editing something VERY EXCITING.

Smashing Sundays is the new podcast from Lucy Pinder (model and actress) and Beth Granville (comedy writer and actress) in which they discuss the quintessential British Sunday with a guest comedian, actor or musician.

Listen to Episode 1 with Tori Scott on Audioboom now - Episode 2 (edited by yours truly) with the LUSH Gabrielle Fernie is out on Sunday.

Assuming I don't accidentally delete it or something. Which would be a shame because it's funny as fuck.

You didn't know I was a sound editor as well, did you? Nor did I, to be fair.

Much love,
- dc



Thighs is go!

3 May 2019



oh merde it's a FUNDRAISING LAUNCH!!

Click here to cut the crap and go straight to my Help Refugees donation page...

This summer I'll be cycling ~1,800km from Rome to Athens because I vehemently believe that borders are really dumb.

Everyone should be able to roam the earth freely and that's why I support the work that Help Refugees are doing to help stateless human beings get a foothold in life.

As one of the lucky, lucky people on earth who haven't had their home village bombed to pieces, I like to do what I can to support those who aren't so fortunate. If that involves cycling an awfully long way in 35 degree heat, then so

be it.

If you think that helping refugees is a generally good idea, then I'd be super grateful if you could donate whatever you can afford.

Click this link to make that happen.

Having visited projects supported by Help Refugees all over Europe, I can reassure you that the work they do is of immense practical support to actual human beings every day. (I've published a lot of these stories on my blog - drop me a line if you want a direct link.)

Thank you in advance for being so generous! And stay tuned because your donation will get you free entry to a very exciting thingy that we're planning for the start of July....

Oh *now* you're interested! (Donate by card or Paypal...)

+++ There's still time to join this year's ride. Maybe London to Paris, or Milan to Venice? If you want to ride with yours truly, then sign up for Rome-Bari or Corfu-Athens!

Talk Migration: Help Refugees

8 May 2019

Last Sunday morning, more than 40 people crammed into a wide circle to 'talk migration' under the wooden beams of Impact Hub in Kings Cross.

Talk Migration was a day of talks and discussion around the topics of migration, borders and refugee rights, organised by Thighs of Steel.

Every year, Thighs of Steel cyclists come together to fundraise for grassroots refugee organisations around Europe. In 2019 they are aiming to raise £100,000 with their legendary London to Athens relay ride.

A bicycle bell called us to order and the smiles rang out…

We started the day with a talk by Philly, one of the founders of refugee support charity Help Refugees.

Help Refugees started as nothing more than a heartfelt response to the growing humanitarian crisis in Calais in the summer of 2015. A few friends and a crowdfunder aiming to raise £1000.

A week later, they'd raised over £50,000, and were receiving 7,000 donations a day – tents, sleeping bags, clothes, toiletries. They rented a warehouse in London, another in Calais, and Help Refugees was born.

Almost 4 years later, Help Refugees are now supporting more than 80 grassroots projects in 12 countries.

This year, 120 Thighs of Steel cyclists are aiming to raise £100,000 for Help Refugees. The funds will be split between grassroots organisations along the Thighs of Steel London to Athens cycle route.

Campaigns Help Refugees support in the UK

- Lift The Ban, to support asylum seekers' right to work
- Set Her Free, against the detention of refugee women in the UK
- Dubs amendment process to settle unaccompanied minors in the UK

Thank you to Thighs of Steel for putting on Talk Migration, a day of talks and discussion around the topics of migration, borders and refugee rights.

If you want to support Help Refugees, then you could do a lot worse than donate to my Thighs of Steel fundraising page 😀

How am I spending the next 4 months?

7 July 2019



Happy Friday Sunday!

We're (more than) halfway through the year. A turning point, if you will. The nights are drawing in, the year is waning.

In just a couple of days, the last episode of Foiled will be recorded and the summer can begin. As good a time as any to take stock.

What might the next few months look like?

After Friday's smash-hit talk at Love Trails (my excuse for not sending this earlier), I am sure that I'd like to do more public speaking.

One of my aims for this year was to spend less time sitting in front of my computer, and to find ways of earning money away from the zeros and ones of a binary existence.

Public speaking and outdoor leadership were my two 2019 targets. Tick and tick (although without too much of the 'earning money' bit).

On Tuesday, the final episode of Foiled Series 3 is recorded. Then on Friday I leave for Paris and the first week of my Thighs of Steel riding.

I'm looking at the ride to Bordeaux as training for the real tough cycling that'll happen later in the summer. I'll almost certainly be suckered for assuming that central France is mere training.

And after Bordeaux? Who knows. The month from ~20 July to ~20 August is vacant. All I know for sure is that I'd like to do a few things:
1. Have a holiday.
2. Write a TV pilot for Foiled with Beth.
3. Carry on working with The Bike Project and Forests News.

One idea is to take a ferry to Sicily and stay there for a month, walking, cycling, and visiting refugee projects. Any suggestions?

From the end of August until mid-September I'll be with Thighs of Steel riding Trieste to Athens. Expect radio silence as far as this newsletter is concerned. Although I would like to gather enough audio from the trip to make a short documentary. So do expect radio noise at some point too.

Once in Athens, I'm sure plenty will have happened to shake up my plans. But I have a few ideas. I could stay in Athens for a spell, pick up my acquaintances, see how things have changed in the last year.

I'd like to get a ferry over to Lesvos, the landing ground for so many thousands of refugees. Then maybe I'll cycle through Turkey, following my nose, and the quieter roads, to Gazientep near the border with Syria.

The culmination of all this travel, I hope, will be a collection of all my writing on migration and refugees over the past 5 or 6 years. Already the 'book' is over 60,000 words - but don't worry, I will be editing.

I'm well aware of sayings about the best laid plans, so I won't call this email to you anything other than a series of ideas. But they are ideas that could keep me well occupied until November or so.

If that be the case, then I wish you an excellent summer and we'll see each other, in the usual places, at the usual time, next week.

Insh'allah.

If you like this sort of thing, then you'll probably also like my back catalogue of over 500 posts, all found at davidcharles.info.

How do you spend your Sunday? Smashing it probably.

I'm on a train up to London, for a spot of mini golf before dinner. Tomorrow we're polishing off the script, and then I'm going for a swim in one of south London's lidos. The madness is over, long live the madness.

Here are three things I've enjoyed on the internet this week:

- The most effective way to tackle climate change? Plant 1 trillion trees (CNN) Headline says it all. Go, plant.
- How I write a book (Alastair Humphreys) Including one inspired idea to shrink your manuscript. Plus pictures from his (damp) notebooks.
- Rupert Sheldrake, Robin Carhart-Harris and Stephen Reid In Conversation (YouTube / The Psychedelic Society) This is one to listen to, rather than watch.

Much love, - dc



The Trials and Tribulations of Van Days

26 July 2019



Happy Friday!

For the first time in nearly two and a half years, I missed sending you an email last week. I'm deeply apologetic - but maybe you thought this was a good thing!

In my defence, last Friday I was cycling into Bordeaux with Thighs of Steel, at the end of a long hot day, at the end of a long hot week. To be honest, I felt pretty good - especially after stopping at a Château for an impromptu wine tasting. So no excuse.

Being part of the core team for Thighs of Steel this year is a very different experience to riding the full week as a fundraiser. Mainly because I spent two of

the six days driving Calypso, the team's support van.

That's not to say that van days are easy. There's an intimidating list of jobs that need to be done:

- Pack up the campsite
- Plan a meal and buy food for dinner
- Drive ~120km (on the wrong side of the road)
- Find the perfect wild camping spot for ~15 cyclists, not too far from the pre-planned route, but quiet, secluded, flat enough for tent-pitching, and ideally close to a river or lake for swimming
- Cook the perfect camp dinner

A dozen hot and hungry cyclists depend on the van team getting this right. Oh - and you have to do all of this while feeling like absolute crap.

It is an unfortunate side effect of long distance cycling that your body mistakenly believes that van days are rest days. The body shuts down, the mind follows suit.

I felt like an extremely hot zombie. This was not great news, especially as I was driving and my French was in high demand to help secure us a wild camp site.

But on Thighs of Steel miracles happen. Indeed, the ride depends on miracles, almost every single day.

I'd been warned that finding wild camping for a dozen cyclists and a humungous van is the hardest part of the job. The plan is completely reliant on some kindly farmer, landowner or mayor taking pity on our ridiculous endeavour and letting us camp on their land.

After all, what would you do if you saw a circle of chairs, filled by dirty-faced foreigners, set up in your orchard?

But, in more than 20 weeks of touring, only once have Thighs of Steel been asked to move on. It is a daily miracle. Thank you, kind-hearted people of Europe.

With the help of my co-driver, I rang the doorbell of a likely-looking landowner, not far off route. We'd spotted a campervan parked in a closely-mown field behind his house.

With the help of his excitable dog, the owner was roused. He opened the door, and the dog bolted for freedom.

The man apologised, but couldn't help: the owner of the field was in Belgium. He suggested that we ask the mayor, gave us directions to the town hall, and started calling for his lost dog.

We drove Calypso up to the quaint village Mairie. It felt like we were parking our tank on their lawn.

I began in faltering French: 'We are 12 cyclists looking for wild camping...' And, hallelujah, it was as if he'd been expecting us. 'I have the perfect place,' he smiled.

What followed felt like the oral part of my GCSE French exam: 'At the crossroads go straight on and follow the road for 3km. You'll see a low, white wall, with a gap in the middle. Go down this track, over a disused railway line through a wood, and then over a small bridge into a field.'

I follow the directions with apprehensive nodding. The mayor finishes by kisses his fingers: 'And the river is perfect for bathing!'

We took his address to send a thank you card from Athens, and then drive out - slightly nervous - to our campsite.

To my astonishment, I'd understood his flawless directions and we found the field atop a tiny island, split by lazy turns of the river. Fishermen dabbled in the

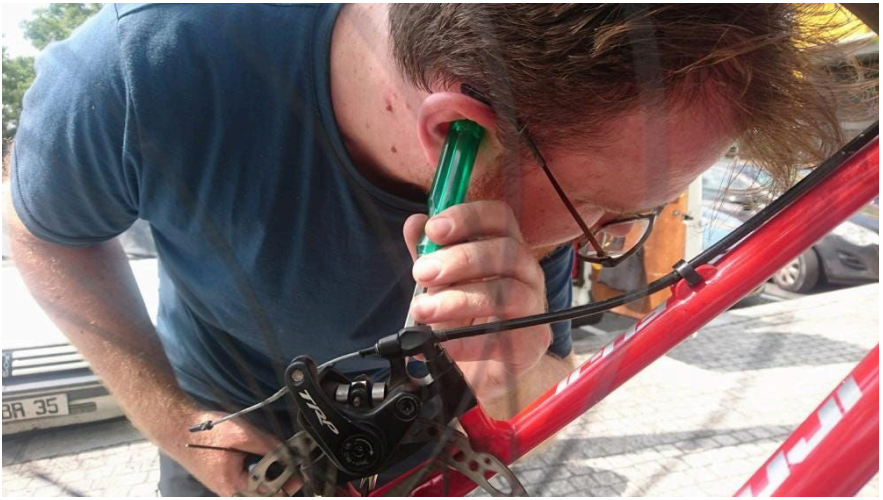
shallows and a paddleboard drifted past.

It was perfect (especially when the insects clear off).

We set up chairs in a circle, looking out at the sun dunking itself into the stream away to the west. We set the pot boiling with a vegetable curry.

Half an hour later, the cyclists arrive, stinking of joy, bells a-ringing. It's only then that we notice the chairs are arranged in a perfect ring around a single, plump dog turd.




TRP





If you like this sort of thing, then you'll probably also like my back catalogue of over 500 posts, all found at davidcharles.info.

I am currently stationed in Napoli, alternating the forno of the streets with the gelato of the air-conditioning.

Due to the ridiculous nature of my life, on Wednesday I shall be returning to the UK for a few weeks to work on Something New with Beth. Then I'll be back out on the road with Thighs of Steel, riding from Trieste to Athens. Praying for miracles.

So far, the cyclists and supporters of Thighs of Steel 2019 have raised over £38,000 for Help Refugees. If you want to help keep the lights on at grassroots refugee organisations across Europe, you could do a lot worse than contribute to my page here. THANK YOU. I promise all donors something delightful by the end of the year...

Save The Date: The first episode of Foiled will be broadcast on 12 August and the following Mondays...

Oh - and always take the swim.

Much love, - dc



Why Mahmoud wears cologne

20 August 2019

The incidental benefits of cycle touring are well known: fitness, tan-lines, an insatiable appetite. But I think I can say without fear of contradiction that cycle touring isn't particularly famous for its promotion of good personal hygiene.

This year, I am proud to be a part of the Thighs of Steel core team for the glory run to Athens. During those last three weeks of riding, I'll probably have only 8 showers and wash my clothes twice. Most days, I'll wake up in the sweat I accumulated the day before, and step into the clothes still encrusted with grime from yesterday's riding.

Most days, our only chance to scrub will be in rivers, lakes and perhaps under a bucket. Shampoo, perfume and pomade are, for most of us, redundant.

But not for all of us.

~

Mahmoud couldn't actually cycle, but joined the van team for two weeks from Paris to the Pyrenees. He couldn't ride because of a long-term knee injury sustained during the Syrian war. He now lives in Germany.

One thing you should know about Mahmoud is that he is very particular about his personal hygiene. Every morning, he combs wax through his styled hair. He applies perfume to neck and wrists, and coats himself in a layer of antiperspirant.

Where most of us have perhaps one change, Mahmoud seems to have a bottomless wardrobe of crisp, clean clothes. He refuses to swim in our wonderfully wild rivers and lakes because the water is dirty. It's a fair point, and one that he emphasises with good old soap and tap water.

He does everything he can to hold back the inevitable tides of sweat and grime that two weeks' camping set down. His careful preening is a good-humoured joke. Good-humoured because he wears his fashion lightly; a joke because, standing next to us cyclists, he looks superb.

~

‘I had days where I slept with the blood of other people on my body,’ Mahmoud says. ‘Because you sleep when you are tired, you don’t care about yourself. You can’t imagine the dirt – sometimes I slept in some shit.’

We’re sitting on an artful block of concrete on the banks of the Garonne in Bordeaux and Mahmoud is explaining why he is such a stickler for cleanliness.

‘Because of this trauma – why do I have to be dirty? Why do I have to smell?’ His voice rises in incredulity that anyone would choose dirt.

‘Everything is in my hands now. I don’t want to go back to those days. I have a developed nose and any smell could bring me flashback – I don’t want any flashback.’

~

‘I feel like cleanliness makes me trust myself more,’ Mahmoud explains. ‘If somebody smells in front of me, I take a step back.’

As a refugee, Mahmoud feels like ‘the whole society has taken a step back from me already.’ He doesn’t need to add bad hygiene to the repulsion.

Mahmoud met Harri and Annie, two of the brains behind Thighs of Steel, at a grassroots community centre in Athens. ‘At Khora, everyone was lovely,’ Mahmoud says. ‘Fucking amazing lovely people. But Khora was a small world, really.’

The small world of fucking amazing lovely people doesn’t care whether you’re a refugee, whether you’re dirty or smell bad, or are dressed in cheap clothes. But the big world does.

~

‘The big world really doesn’t like you, really doesn’t want you, and doesn’t accept you,’ Mahmoud says. ‘So I have to do what other Syrians do. They spend money to wear Adidas, to wear Gucci – why? To fit into the society, so people know they have money, so people stop judging them. You cannot afford Gucci if you are not working.’

‘I could lie to myself and say everyone is nice – no. People smile in front of your face, but they don’t like you. They smile in front of your face for the society. Do you think that everyone talks to me nicely?’

‘For me, to look good and to be clean could help me in front of society. People might accept me.’

~

Thighs of Steel is Europe’s biggest charity relay bike ride, taking 9 weeks to cover the 6,000km from London to Athens, with a frankly silly detour via the Pyrenees to make it more than 90,000m climbing over three of the continent’s toughest mountain ranges.

Over the past four years, Thighs of Steel supporters have raised more than a quarter of a million pounds for grassroots refugee organisations like Khora. Already this year we’ve raised more than £50,000.

If you want to help…

If you have any trouble donating, let me know – the website isn’t always the friendliest. Thanks!

She left me a letter

1 September 2019



Happy Friday! Saturday!

I hope you're enjoying the Saturday feeling of this email - Fridays on Thighs of Steel are too busy to find much time to write.

Mind you, Saturdays are scarcely any more leisurely - I've just spent the last 4 hours fixing bikes - but typing is at least possible when you're not pedalling or holding a steering wheel.

So here we are - Dubrovnik.

Almost improbably, every single cyclist survived the 780km of roads and the Everest of mountain climbing this week. Trieste feels very far away when you've touched every inch of melting asphalt.

Astonishingly, we've raised over £60,000 for Help Refugees.

I spent three days this week driving the van, navigating around the back lanes of Trieste and Dubrovnik, crossing four borders, flying down the Adriatic coastal road, picking up hitchhikers, tracking down propane on a Sunday, hunting for wild camping spots in resort towns, miming the Croatian for 'recycling', and generally trying desperately to hold it all together so that the cyclists had somewhere safe to sleep and something enormous to eat.

The other three days were easy: a mere matter of cycling 130km in 34 degree heat. Sea swim stops, dobre-dans with the locals, waiters in roadside cafes, burek pastries enough to keep us going and going and going until it's time to put down our bikes and put up our tents.

Today we said sudden goodbyes to the Week 7 crew and in half an hour we sit down to eat with Week 8. Thighs of Steel is a fierce bonding experience and already I can feel the enthusiasm of the new cyclists bubbling over.

This morning the Core Team shared one minute's silence. The quietest it's been all week. We ride again tomorrow!



If you like this sort of thing, then you'll probably also like my back catalogue of over 500 posts, all found at davidcharles.info.

Finally, reader, I have an update. Remember a couple of weeks ago, I wrote a piece about leaving love letters?

Well, I have news.

The night before I left the UK on my voyage across the continent, I messaged Sylia to tell her that I was passing through Paris again. She didn't reply and, with the madness of Thighs of Steel, I forgot all about it.

Until yesterday, when I got this message, only 11 days late:

Paris! I left you a note!

Missed 11 days after I was in the city. Gutted.

But when I was in Paris, I'd had a feeling. I arrived late at night, around 9pm, and my hostel was a 45 minute walk to Notre Dame. An hour and a half return trip, I was tired, and had an early start.

I had to go there, to see if there was a letter. I had to.

So I walked 45 minutes along the Seine to our letter crossing cache, a crack in the river bank masonry. On the off chance.

What did I find? Police. Police is what I found. There was a concert at Notre Dame and the whole area was closed off.

At the time, I thought it was a shame, but I hadn't heard from Sylia so in a way I was pleased - I would never know how she'd felt on reading my letter. We could leave the love hanging in the light Parisian air.

Until yesterday's message.

At least now I know where I must take my return route. Stay tuned...

Much love, - dc


BEETHOVEN
LISZT
SCHUBERT
CHOPIN
TODAY AUJOURD'HUI
GOSPEL
CHOPIN
GERSHWIN
CHOPIN
GERSHWIN



The kindest country in the world?

7 September 2019



Happy Friday! Saturday!

Greetings from Igoumenista, a surprisingly warm town best known as a jumping off point for Corfu.

There is a word in Greek, *xenia*, which translates (badly) as 'guest friendship'. It manifests as generous hospitality to strangers and travellers and is a common theme in Ancient Greek mythology.

I remember studying *xenia* as a central theme of *The Odyssey*. As Odysseus is battered and blown from port to port across the Mediterranean Sea, his return to Ithaka is made possible thanks only to extravagant displays of *xenia* by the people upon whose shores he washes up. (With the exception of witches who turn his crew into pigs and the like.)

One of those to help him (after a seven year delay...) with wine, bread and a raft was a nymph who gave her name to the the Thighs of Steel support van -

Calypso.

Thighs of Steel, like the famous Odyssey, is a journey entirely dependent on the extraordinary *xenia* of those we meet, those who fill our water bottles, find us camping spots, give directions and food and welcoming smiles.

Xenia may be a Greek concept, but there must surely be a similar word in Albanian. Everywhere we went this week we have been almost assaulted with outrageous generosity.

Three cafe owners refused to let us pay for our coffees or cold drinks, and one gave us chocolate bars when we asked if we could use his toilet.

A car wash owner (Albania is full of *lavazh* car washes) broke off his siesta and fixed my bike while his black-clad mother brought out a watermelon and ice water for the rest of the group.

It seemed that whenever we went to pay, we were met with a touch of the heart and a smile. Such was the hospitality that it became almost an embarrassment.

One afternoon, as the sun crushed us like bugs into the asphalt, we spotted what we thought was a bar where we might be able to buy drinks and eat our leftover lunches from last night's dinner.

But when we rolled up to the establishment, the bar turned out to be a restaurant. Quite a fine restaurant, with white cloths on busy tables that were piled up with plates of salad and grilled fish.

'Maybe they'll let us eat our lunch here anyway?'

At this suggestion, two thoughts surfaced:

1) This is Albania: *of course* the proprietor will let us eat our pots of chilli and bread rolls at his restaurant, use his toilet, fill up our water bottles and cool off in the shade of his veranda. He would touch his heart and smile.

2) If this Albanian man showed up at any restaurant in the UK and asked to eat his packed lunch, use the toilet and fill his water bottles under the shade of the veranda, there is no way in hell he'd be given anything other than an angry clip round the ear.

I felt ashamed and walked off down the road, looking for any corner of unbleached stone where we could sit and picnic. By the time I came back, the rest of the group was pulling out our food as the restaurant owner welcomed them with a fresh table cloth. A neighbouring table of soldiers clinked beer bottles and translated.

As it happened, we ended up buying quite a lot of extra food, so I think it worked out pretty well for the kind restauranteur, but that's not the point. I have never known such unrelenting generous hospitality from an entire citizenry on my travels before.

Chapeau Albania!



If you like this sort of thing, then you'll probably also like my back catalogue of over 500 posts, all found at davidcharles.info.

Thighs of Steel 2019 Fundraising Update: £65,587 which puts the total raised over the past four years at more than £300,000. Frankly ridiculous.

Today we welcome the last group of cyclists for the final 590km through Greece to Athens. It's been a busy couple of weeks, but full of wondrous highs and I'm looking forward to filling my boots with spanakopita, tiropita and the elusive manitaropita.

Until Athens, much love, - dc



Thighs of Steel arrives in Athens, all together

15 September 2019



After more than 6,000km and 90,000m of climbing, Thighs of Steel is done and dusted for another year.

Over the past 9 weeks, more than 90 cyclists have covered every single inch of asphalt between here and London. As part of the core team for 4 weeks this year, I have cycled 1,670 of those kilometres (8.9 laps of the M25) and climbed 18,600m (2.1 ascents of Everest).

I also shared 7 van days, supporting the incredible sweat-work of the fundraising cyclists, finding wild camp spots, fixing broken bikes, cooking hearty dinners and generally trying to make everything run as smoothly as a transcontinental bike ride can be.

After the glorious hospitality of Albania last week, the final ride from Igoumenitsa to Athens was littered with unforeseen crises.

- Two bikes arrived destroyed by airlines. On day one, another bike fell apart on the road. On day three, a fourth bike succumbed.
- On the first night, the police broke up our beachside camp with hard stares and unveiled threats.
- The starter motor on Calypso (the van) broke, leaving the van team stranded on a beach with hungry, tired cyclists rushing ahead expecting food and shelter.
- At the tunnel under the Ambracian Gulf, the whole team were told that the shuttle service for cyclists had been terminated, they couldn't cross, and should instead make a 100km detour.
- We had our first serious accident: a gravel slip on a fast descent that left a bruising dent in an elbow.
- After fixing precisely zero punctures in the past 3 weeks, this week I personally replaced three exploded inner tubes – other teams copped yet more.
- On the final morning of the ride, a thunderstorm broke. Sheet lightning, thunder claps and hard rain laying waste to the camp we'd pitched among the stones of an ancient archaeological site.

But of all the weeks I have taken part in, this was the one I enjoyed the most.

Albania was the country I most loved cycling through, but this week gave me the sense – nay, the strong belief that no challenge was insurmountable for this motley collection of strangers that had come together to ride and raise money for refugees.

This disaster-filled ride most encapsulated the Thighs of Steel ethos: whatever troubles we face, we face together and we solve together.

It is testament to the resilience and generosity of the human spirit that, when we come together in common cause, anything is possible. I feel like the past few weeks, in the company of so many committed people, have filled me up with good faith in our shared humanity.

On Thighs of Steel we usually ride in two or three groups so that we're staggered across the roads. It's easier to manage smaller teams and groups of four or five dodge much of the ire of other road users.

But it was fitting that, after weathering the morning's tempestuous thunderstorm, Thighs of Steel 2019 ended with the 16 cyclists gathering in a restaurant just outside Athens and riding into the city to meet the van team at the summit of Lycabettus, so that we could celebrate our ride all together.

~

Thighs of Steel 2019 Fundraising Update: £67,736

£10,000 of your generous donations will help fund Pedal Power, a cycle training programme for female refugees in Birmingham. I've written a bit about Pedal Power and Thighs of Steel on The Bike Project blog if you'd like to read more.

Thanks everyone!

Merry Thighsmas!

27 December 2019

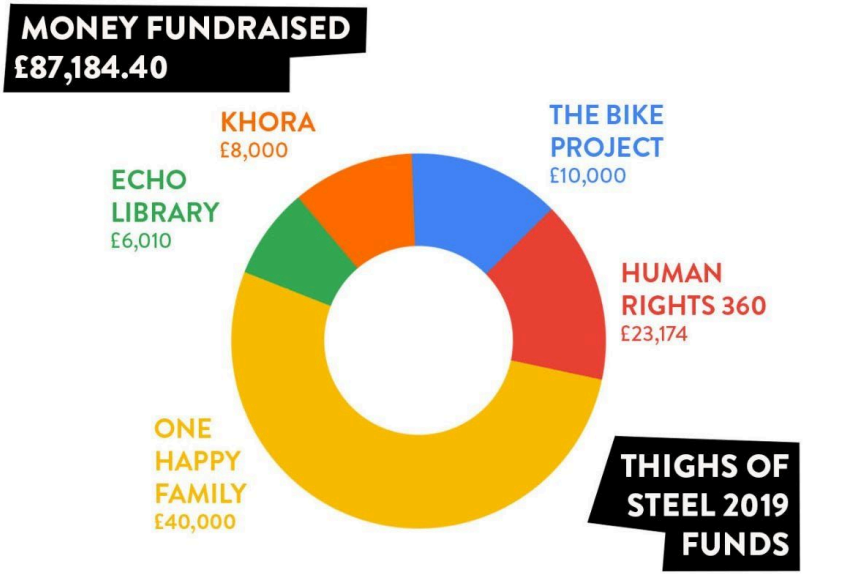
We are thrilled to announce that together this year Thighs of Steel have raised a staggering **£87,184.40** for grassroots refugee organisations.

A big thank you to everyone who donated – it means a lot!

Guided by expert advice from Help Refugees, that money has been granted to five organisations we believe will do justice to your hard earned cash.

Picking projects to fund is a tough job, and of course we wish we could support every project with everything they need, but we've tried to cover a wide range of refugee needs, including emergency aid, legal assistance, social integration and human dignity.

Here is a pretty pie chart showing where the money's gone:



You can learn more about all these projects, exactly what we're funding and why by reading The Reason page on the Thighs of Steel website. Thanks again.

Early bird for Thighs!

17 January 2020



Happy Friday!

We have a route for Thighs of Steel 2020 - and it's even more ridiculous than we could ever have hoped.

If you want early bird access to signups for the world's longest charity relay bike ride, then go on and subscribe to our semi-secret mailing list here.

By joining this special only-for-you-guys mailing list, you'll get access to signups on Monday 24 February - a whole five days before the rest of the planet.

If you need more juicy details, then read on...

If you're repelled by the idea of cycling really far for a good reason, then skip over this - there's a nice bit about birds and bins afterwards.

WEEK 1 (5-11 JUL): LONDON TO AMSTERDAM
AKA THE CYCLING UTOPIA ONE

More challenging than past Week Ones in terms of distance, this ride is perfect for cycling utopians who dream of dedicated bike lanes and all-you-can-eat pancakes. Plus you can hop on the Eurostar back home - logistically simple *and* environmentally sound. Winning.

WEEK 2 (11-18 JUL): AMSTERDAM TO STUTTGART
AKA THE FIVE COUNTRIES ONE

Spin your way through the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France *and* Germany, including one beast of a day that will smash the 200km barrier. Expect Disney-like forests, rolling hills and cooling lakes as we swoon through the green heart of Western Europe.

WEEK 3 (18-25 JUL): STUTTGART TO LJUBLJANA
AKA THE FREAKIN ALPS ONE

Ah, yes - you beauty! This is an all-time classic Thighs route so expect nothing less than the highest tarmacked mountain climb in Austria, ecstatic views worthy of their own symphony and enough ice cream to take out the Death Star.

WEEK 4 (25 JUL-1 AUG): LJUBLJANA TO BRATISLAVA
AKA THE BACK OVER THE FREAKIN ALPS ONE

This is where things get crazy, as we take a left turn north from Slovenia, back over the glorious Alps, and into Austria and Slovakia. Cycling through three countries that are basically one big forest national park, prepare to be blown away by beauty. And pumpkin seeds.

WEEK 5 (8-14 AUG): BRATISLAVA TO KRAKOW
AKA THE WITCH'S MOUNTAIN ONE

Bookended by two of Europe's most famous city break cities, this week's three mountain ranges - including Babia Góra, the Witch's Mountain - are crammed into five days' cycling. Expect luscious national parks, bears, wolves and lynx, and views cut straight from Tolkein.

WEEK 6 (14-22 AUG): KRAKOW TO CLUJ
AKA THE УКРАЇНА ONE

Ukraine?! Hell yeah. If it's adventure you're after, then look no further. This absolute monster of a week follows the dizzying Carpathian mountains all the way from Poland to Romania, via the exotic question mark that is Ukraine.

WEEK 7 (22-29 AUG): CLUJ TO SOFIA
AKA THE FREAKIN TRANSYLVANIAN ALPS ONE

This is our second biggest climbing week, offering the kings and queens of the mountains not one, not two, but *three* ranges to cross. Get good at Romanian, Bulgarian or charades, and expect road surfaces as unpredictable as the snacks we'll eat.

WEEK 8 (30 AUG-5 SEP): SOFIA TO THESSALONIKI
AKA THE RILA AND RHODOPE ONE

Jammed into just five days of cycling, this week gives us Europe's most ancient forests in Bulgaria, plus the glorious mountains of Rila and Rhodope and untamed beauty of historic Thrace. That means buckets of adventure. We really mean it. There might be bears.

WEEK 9 (5-12 SEP): THESSALONIKI TO ATHENS
AKA THE GLORY RUN ONE

This is the glory run and what a glorious run it will be! Mount Olympus on the horizon and the mythical island of Evia underfoot, expect to sleep on beaches and climb mountains. Plus that first glimpse of Athens after 6,000km of Steely adventure. Chapeau!

How to Play Thighs of Steel

If you don't know how the world's longest (and bestest) charity relay bike ride works, then here's a quick and dirty guide on How to Play Thighs of Steel:

1. Don't worry - you're not cycling the whole thing, this is a relay. **Pick one week that fills you with butterflies of excitement rather than dread.** There's something on this route for cyclists of all abilities and we are totally non-competitive. Historically, more than half of our cyclists have been women - I only mention that because cycle touring has a shit reputation of being lonely, miserable and macho. It'll be challenging, but you'll never be alone and, with smiles, songs and snacks, everyone helps everyone through. Most people only do one week of the relay - some crazies do two.
2. **Do logistics.** Book your time off work and your transport to and from the start and finish cities.
3. **Train like heck.** We have training rides every month in London and there are now over 200 current and former Thighs cyclists you can meet up with for beers and bikes. (In reality, you'll probably only train a bit and then panic unduly. It'll be fine. We all do this.)
4. **Fundraise like heck.** All the money goes to grassroots refugee organisations and we suggest you aim for a minimum of £500. We're always on hand for fundraising advice. Putting on a party or a dinner is always a winner, but don't forget the simple stuff like charity pots in your local cafes and pubs. Over the past four years, Thighs cyclists have raised over £320,000 for projects that are making a real difference to the lives of refugees in the UK and Greece.
5. **Cycle a really long way.** Wahay! Adventure and the unknown is our standard operating procedure as we wild ride, wild camp and wild swim our way across the continent. People focus on the cycling, but what makes Thighs special is the people. Nothing bonds a campful of strangers like climbing a mountain in 40 degree heat, or getting sprayed down by a farmer with a power hose, or handing out a pannier full of figs picked straight from the tree, or mending a puncture in a thunderstorm, or just

sitting by a lake at the end of a long day and watching the sun set in silence.

6. **Come home** with a suntan, steely thighs and stuffed full of stories to share. It won't be the end unless you want it to be. Repeat with friends in 2021?

Signups open for real on Sunday 1 March, but you can get early bird access on Monday 24 February by joining a special mailing list. This is good because places go fast and no one wants to miss out!

Any questions? Just reply to this email and I'll help you out.

The Bins on Brownsea



'Have you got decent bins?' I'm asked by a man wearing a cagoule.

Well, isn't that an intrusive question! And I'm about to muster indignant excuses for forgetting to take the recycling out when the man waggles a pair of binoculars and adds: 'They really help you get up close.'

I'm on a boat in the middle of Poole Harbour, in the squalling rain and the huffing wind of a gale blowing in. The boat has a full cargo of people in cagoules with decent bins, here for an RSPB bird tour of Brownsea Island.

I think it's fair to say that I'm not a birder. And yet here I am – and next week I'll be cycling around the RSPB nature reserve at Rainham Marshes. Maybe you don't choose birding; maybe birding chooses you.

'Great Northern Diver at eleven o'clock – no he's dived. Shag at one o'clock. Spoonbill on the beach. Merganser pair just taking off – three o'clock.'

A running commentary sends us birders lurching from one side of the wind-lashed deck to the other, hunting through our misty bins for flecks of white on the storm-grey sea.

For the hobbying birder, this trip is all about spotting new species. When the commentator announces a Slovenian Grebe at four o'clock, there is quite the commotion, let me tell you.

I stare blindly over the hunched shoulders of twitching bin-bearers. I'm as astonished as anyone: Slovenia is all but land-locked – I wouldn't have thought it'd be known for its sea birds.

Slavonian Grebe. *Slavonian*. They can swallow fish whole and eat their own feathers. And they're so rare that they're on something ominously called the Red List.

Despite frantic Wikipedia research and my rapid identification of a Swan at eleven o'clock, I think it's fair to say that I'm still not a birder.

My favourites are the bobbers: those birds who bob on the tide, waiting patiently until I catch them in the rings of my borrowed bins before beating their wings against the spray or pulling a dive into the choppy waves.

Other than that, I still rank my birds by the romanticism of their names. Avocet. Little Stint. Black-tailed Godwit.

And, of course, the Wigeon. 'Isn't that just a wet pigeon?' I ask a friend, also not a birder. 'I thought Wigeon was a Pokémon character,' she says.

After two hours of chasing feathers, we dock at the John Lewis castle and make our way onto the island.

Brownsea Island has been a National Trust nature reserve since the sixties, after the people of Poole somehow raised £100,000 to save their island from Billy Butlin, he of holiday camp notoriety.

But the only reason there was ever any question of Brownsea becoming a nature reserve was thanks to the whim of a monied misanthropist.

Mary Bonham-Christie bought the island in 1927 and immediately ordered the mass eviction of the 200 people who lived there, then banned the Boy Scouts from their historic campsite and finally hired goons to eject any meddling intruders.

By the time she shuffled off this mortal coil (the ultimate act of any self-respecting misanthrope), only she and her boatman lived on the island. It's fair to say that Bonham-Christie was not a people person.

But her loathing for the human race did open up a hitherto overcrowded corner of the ecosystem for other wildlife. Red squirrels most famously, but also other cute animals including voles and sika deer (the pretty ones with spots).

This imposed haven from humanity made the island an appealing acquisition for the National Trust who completed the purchase in 1962 with help from the Dorset Wildlife Trust, the Scout and Guide Movements and John Lewis (whose staff holiday in the castle). Now goon-free, Brownsea Island has been open to the public for nearly sixty years.

Birders in particular are drawn to Brownsea thanks to the work of another, shall we say 'energetic', aristocrat, Colonel William Petrie Waugh.

When he bought the island, Waugh saw an opportunity in the shallow water to expand his territory. With a bulk order of over a million bricks, he and his lackeys built a wall in the middle of the sea, enclosing a vast paddling pool from which wind-powered pumps extracted the water. Hey presto – pasture for grazing cattle.

But you can't keep the sea out forever, not without constant investment (see also: the Netherlands), and gradually the sea wall started leaking. As the salt water joined forces with freshwater leaking from inland, an enormous lagoon was created.

Cue cheers of delight from a multitude of invertebrates – and the sea birds who prey on them: the Shoveler and Teal and Turnstone and Dunlin that us birders had all come to inspect through our rain-splattered bins.

One morning wasn't nearly enough, but it was a glimpse, a respite in a day battered by storms. We can, if we allow ourselves, be bewitched by nature. I returned to the fraying town doused and refreshed, content.

How to play Thighs of Steel

27 January 2020



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Breakdown

6 March 2020

Thanks for stopping for a read — especially if you're new around here. Always nice to welcome new eyeballs. This week has been colourful: the iris and retina of the sea and sky, the slate and rust of the city. How's your week been?

> *Whosoever plants a tree, winks at immortality. Earlier today, I planted a tree in an orchard: a Christmas present from the parents that might last 40 years. Picking time is in Late August: help yourself at developed.fallen.obviously*

Border Breakdown

As you may have heard, Turkey has opened their border with the EU, giving refugees the chance to try their luck at crossing.

This has very little to do with humanity; it's a power game Turkish President Erdogan is playing, trying to leverage either more money or more support for his military manoeuvres in Syria.

But humanity will out, just as the 2016 EU-Turkey deal never will.

The EU was supposed to give Turkey loads of money and ease restrictions on free movement for Turkish people. In exchange, Turkey would accept returns of 'irregular migrants' and enforce the EU border *in Turkey*.

In the meantime, those who break the line of defence will find their journeys stopped in the five 'hotspot' islands of the Aegean: Lesvos, Samos, Chios, Kos and Leros, where their asylum claims will be processed (interminably slowly), like as not destined to be returned to Turkey.

The deal has trapped millions of refugees fleeing conflict in Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and beyond.

This was never going to work really, was it?

1) There's no amount of money you can throw at a problem like this. The only solution is to flip the script and give refugees the right to work for money

themselves from Day 1.

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees accords refugees the right to work — but most countries don't fully honour this commitment. It's insane.

People are working to have this absurdity overthrown in the UK. You can join the campaign here.

2) Hard borders are unenforceable. Even the Iron Curtain was permeable. The folly of a hard border demands a Turkish coastguard that is omniscient and omnipresent. It's not. So boats get through to the island hotspots in Greece, inside the EU.

A hard border also demands that the Greek island communities repulse the new arrivals. But humans don't do that. We have too much in common; too much solidarity.

As mushy-minded flimsy fools, we are too touched by the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have done unto you. Despite reports of black-clad militants in speedboats, Greek volunteers rush the boats with water and warmth.

The xenia of welcome can't be sustained, of course. Conditions in the island camps are sickening and, see point one: there is still no amount of money you can throw at a problem like this. Let people work.

We're leaving the EU, not Europe. In theory, we could use our new status outside the supranational bloc to opt out of the collective punishment of border brutality and welcome refugees directly.

I've got to say, though: that seems unlikely to happen.

More likely is that we can continue to show faith in humanity. Sign a petition. Or…

Let's tackle it together

AKA: Why I'm cycling 3,000km+ this summer

With Thighs of Steel this summer I'll be cycling 3,000km, across the Carpathian mountains, through Transylvania and the Balkans, from Bratislava to Athens.

It's an odd way to remember that our borders are trapping millions of people in intolerable conditions. But it's my way.

Today, there are more than 42,000 people living in horrifying camps on the Aegean Islands — stuck there until such a time as we collectively choose compassion over nationalism.

Read this story, told by a woman living in Vial camp on Chios, to find out what life is really like in a Greek refugee camp.

And, of course, that figure of 42,000 is dwarfed by the 3,500,000+ Syrian refugees trapped in Turkey.

It's easy to feel hopeless, but I think we can make a difference.

That's why I ride with Thighs of Steel and why, as part of the core team this year, I'm doing all I can to help the other 100+ cyclists raise tonnes of cash for Help Refugees.

The main beneficiary of the money we raise will be Khora, a grassroots community centre in Athens that offers displaced people hot food, legal support and friendship. The centre is run entirely by volunteers on solidarity and donations.

I visited Khora last year and met a wonderful bunch of people who are already making a difference. The work they do is of immense practical and psychological support to actual human beings every day.

Alee is a long-term volunteer and refugee from Pakistan who found Khora after the factory where he worked was shut down in 2016.

'I didn't come here to volunteer,' Alee told me. 'When I came here, I was homeless, I was jobless, I was penniless — even hopeless, to some extent.

'I was at the verge of mental collapse,' he says. 'I mean, I could have been suicidal. I could jump from the fifth floor. The Khora volunteers kept me alive. Honestly, I'm telling you, they kept me alive.'

Fluent in multiple languages, including Greek, Alee started volunteering as a translator on the Khora info desk, during refugee hospital visits and with the legal team.

Now Alee spends most of his volunteer time at the Khora Free Shop, where refugees and others can pick up clothes, shoes, toiletries, books, toys and other things they might not be able to afford.

'Khora is about giving hope as well as help,' Alee says.

If you think that helping refugees is a generally good idea, then there's loads you can do.

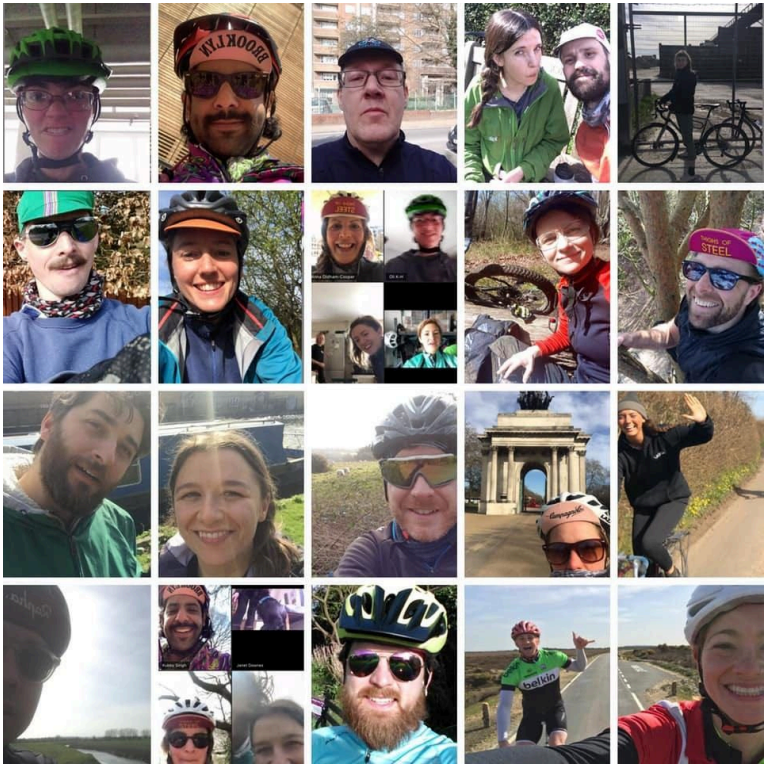
- If cycling is your cup of tea, join us! We are three-quarters full, but there's still space for you. It's a great bunch of people, passionate about making change happen.
- If you can afford to donate to the Thighs 2020 appeal, then I promise you that even the most modest gift will do things that simply wouldn't happen without your contribution. Honestly. Like paying the motorway tolls so that a library van can get out of Athens to the refugee camp in Corinth. Without that handful of Euros, the van doesn't go and the kids in the camp kick cans in the dust instead.

Thank you.

Thighsolation

27 March 2020

And welcome. A particularly warm (yet socially distanced) welcome to all of you friendly folk who signed up off the back of Documentally's last excellent newsletter. Thanks for joining us — I hope you find something encouraging here.



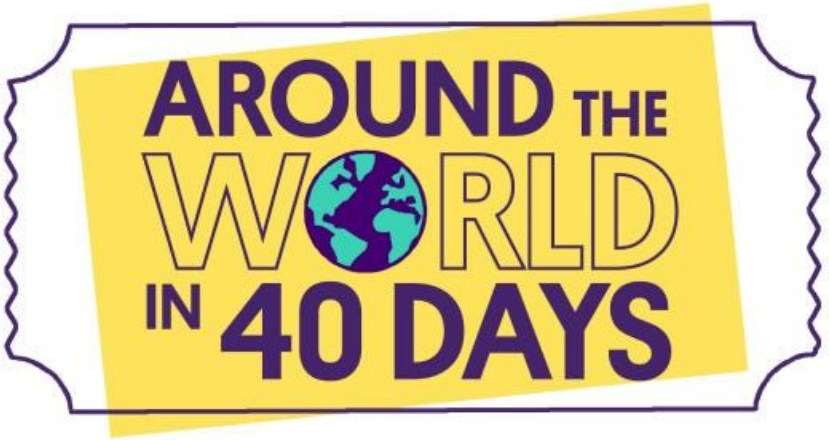
Bespoke

22 May 2020

And welcome to the silent sound of several hundred people stretching their legs, lubricating their nethers and applying sun cream. Tomorrow we begin…

Long time readers will know that every year I do a bit of fundraising for grassroots refugee organisations.

Starting tomorrow, Thighs of Steel, Help Refugees, over 200 people and MEEEE are embarking on an epic lockdown-friendly fundraising challenge.



Over the next 40 days, we're aiming to collectively run/ride/roll 29,000 miles around the hypothetical globe — the way things are going we might even manage two loops!

So, the big ask:

- Do you agree with us that getting meals out to refugees in lockdown is a worthwhile cause?
- Or, to try the blackmail approach, have you ever got anything you value from this newsletter? It'd mean a lot to show your appreciation by making a small donation.

- Could you spare £5, £25 or £50 to help refugees get through Covid-19?

If you answered yes to two or more of these questions, I'd be thrilled if you make a donation. (I'm currently on £0 😭) Just hit the magic button:

If you don't, can't or won't, it's fine. I still love you. We're all in different situations and I'm sure some of you reckon there are more important causes in the world. Fair enough.

If you do donate, though — thank you! I will send you exciting bespoke electronic post (i.e. an email to your email address).

This is assuming I can work out who you are from your donation. If you want to make sure you get your electronic post, please reply to this email and say hi!

Over the past two years, mega generous donations from friends, family and complete strangers have helped Thighs of Steel cyclists raise more than £120,000 for refugee support organisations like Khora in Athens and The Bike Project in London and Birmingham.

We believe that everyone deserves good legal advice, healthy food, companionship and a new start in a safe country. We don't want to let Covid-19 stop the good work!

Finally: if you'd like to join us by fundraising and riding/running/rolling any number of miles—awesome—head over to the Help Refugees x Thighs of Steel page.

Any more for any more?

- The London Migration Film Festival has opened up an amazing vault of films—expect Chinese dogs, Sicilian fishermen and Bulgarian prostitutes—all free to watch online. I haven't watched any of them, but I know some of you are in the market for long form visuals!
- Athena Skates: short film about an all-female skate crew in Athens. I have watched this: it's a lovely piece of work. Thanks to Alex for making it!
- Solving the miracle Sudoku. As Ben Orlin says:

> You're about to spend the next 25 minutes watching a guy solve a Sudoku. Not only that, but it's going to be the highlight of your day.

That's all this time round. I hope you find a moment this weekend to walk slowly through a field. (Unless you've got hay fever…)

Much love,
dc:

p.s.: Happy birthday dad!

Join us for World Refugee Day

19 June 2020

They say that every dog has its day—and some marketing departments take that literally. Next Friday, for example, is Pet Sitters International's Take Your Dog to Work Day.

A quick scan of the internet tells me that Tuesday was Bloomsday (I'm listening to Ulysses at the moment as it happens). Wednesday, meanwhile, was World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought and yesterday was National Freelancers Day (I took it off work).

Today is World Sickle Cell Day. A sprinkling of sickle cell facts: sickle cell diseases are most prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa and kill over 100,000 people a year—but the sickle cell trait offers some protection against malaria. An iron fist in a velvet glove.

But tomorrow is World Refugee Day. Ah—that explains my headline!

Why should I care?

If you've ever crossed a border without being beaten up, then, in my own personal opinion, you are in credit. The closest I've come is a hard stare from a Serbian border guard. I owe it to my passport to care.

There are now nearly 80 million displaced people in the world, including nearly 30 million refugees. That's a lot of people—but not in a Daily Mail kind of a way. Pretty much zero of those people have come to the UK.

Okay, not zero: precisely 0.43 percent of the world's refugees have found sanctuary on this 'sceptred isle'. For comparison, Turkey hosts nearly 13 percent of those humans.

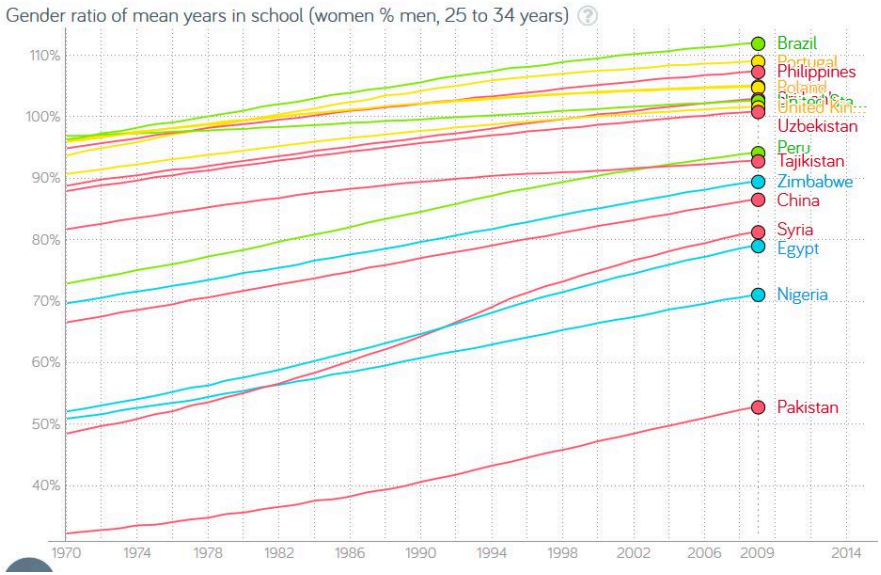
Uganda, a country with a GDP a *hundred* times smaller than the UK, hosts ten times as many refugees. I don't know about you, but I did not know Uganda was that poor—or the UK so rich.

I don't think we're doing our bit, do you?

Yay, progress! (Except not for people fleeing war, sorry)

You might not believe it from the headlines, but many indicators of global quality of life are improving: the number of people escaping from extreme poverty, for example, or the number of girls accessing education, or child mortality rates.

In fact, take a few minutes to play around with all the good news using the awesome Gapminder tools. It'll put a smile on your face. Then come back for the bad news...



Things are getting better. Source: Gapminder.

Unfortunately, for refugees, the world is a more hostile place today than it was a decade ago. As the latest UNHCR report states:

> Over the last decade, only four million refugees were able to return to their native countries, compared with 10 million the previous decade. Roughly 0.5 per cent of the world's refugees were offered resettlement in 2019.

0.5 percent?! Wow. We need more than one day to solve this problem. But let's face it: there are other problems in the world, so…

Seeing as we've only got a day—let's ride our bikes?!

This Saturday, in solidarity with refugees all over the world, Thighs of Steel and Help Refugees are riding their bikes all the way from London to Khora's home in Athens—about 2,000 miles.

I'm asking—nay begging—for your support. As cyclists, as donors, as megaphones.

🚴 **If you or your friends would like to join us for the day, then you can set up your own fundraising page here: https://help-refugees.secure.force.com/aroundtheworldsignup**

💚 Or you can easily join in without setting up your own page by sending your lovely donors to the main fundraising page here: https://help-refugees.secure.force.com/aroundtheworldmain

The theme for this year's World Refugee Day is Every Action Counts. Whether you ride 1 mile or 100; whether you raise £1,000 or simply chuck in a tenner from your own pocket, every action really does count.

It's only one day of the year, but your contribution tomorrow could make a real difference to refugees—people who truly understand the meaning of the trite saying 'out of the frying pan and into the fire'.

What will happen to the money?

We're fundraising for Help Refugees, a grassroots organisation that grew out of the upsurge of empathy for migrants in 2015. Here's what they say about how they spend the money raised:

> Together, we are supporting hundreds of thousands of people—with access to medical care, sanitation, food, emotional support, and much much more. This isn't the world we want to live in, and we are working to change it, but while refugees are forced to live like this,

> we will be there for them. Thank you so much for making this possible.

Thighs of Steel is the major donor to Khora, a voluntary organisation in Athens that exists to support displaced people, refugees, asylum seekers, homeless people and vulnerable groups in general.

During the Covid crisis, Khora volunteers have been preparing and delivering food to around 2,200 vulnerable people every other day. All this extra support costs money—as much as £24,000 per month. This remarkable act of solidarity relies entirely on money given by strangers.

Imagine...

I'll finish with this little poem from Lemn Sissay, which the legends at Refugee Week are sharing as the jumping off point for the first of eight Simple Acts you can take to stand with refugees.

> I will not limit myself
> I will not be afraid
> If it were not imagined
> How else could it be made?

If it can be imagined, it can be made. Another world is possible.

> This isn't the world we want to live in, and we are working to change it, but while refugees are forced to live like this, we will be there for them.

Join us. Thank you.

Not a bike ride

10 July 2020

And welcome to this—actually what is this? This newsletter woke up this morning with an identity crisis. The problem is that this newsletter has recently noticed that a lot of other newsletters make big promises to big audiences hungry for big answers.

This one doesn't. This newsletter doesn't promise to make you happier, more creative or more productive. This newsletter tries to accept you the way you are. If it does anything, it might help you think about life in a different way. My way. The author has arrived, waving from behind his keyboard—welcome!

This week's long read

- This is not a bike ride: Cycling around Britain again?



Above: A soft day on the Thames

This is not a bike ride

In an alternate reality, right now I'm preparing to join Thighs of Steel on an adventurous detour through the wilds of the Carpathian Mountains as we wend our way from London to Athens.

In this reality, however, our epic fundraising adventure has long been cancelled and instead we spent May and June riding remotely, collectively raising over £110,000 for refugees hit by this thing called Covid-19.

I'm grateful that I haven't been sick, that I've been able to continue working and that we've still managed to do some good for those less privileged. But lockdown does funny things to the brain and seeing my summer plans cancelled wasn't a very nice feeling.

So back in April I promised myself that I would do Something Else. I drew up a few different options, which naturally depended on the state of the pandemic when July 2020 rolled around.

Top of the list was to cycle around Britain. Again.

~

2011 was the year of the Arab Spring. Barack Obama was in the White House (and ordered the assassination of Osama Bin Laden). Amy Winehouse died.

On 17 July that year, a few days after my nan's funeral, I left home on a 58 day, 4,110 mile bike ride around Britain. It was my first huge bike tour and I knew next to nothing about bikes or the psychological challenges of riding so far. That ride gave me a wellspring of resiliance that has stayed with me ever since.

Next Friday, exactly nine years later, I'm leaving home on my bike again to *not* cycle around Britain. Despite everything, I feel much better prepared. This time I know that this is not a bike ride. These are the tentative first pedal strokes into a physical, psychological and social unknown.

I'm not expecting anything. I'll board my bike, fully laden with camping and recording kit, and do nothing more than turn the pedals to see what happens.

~

At the time of writing, cycling and camping in England is deemed safe by the government. How it will feel when I'm actually out there is a different question altogether: I'm acutely aware that camping in both Scotland and Wales is still forbidden.

2020 is not 2011.

It could be that the government, the virus or I decide that one day's riding is more than enough and I come home on Saturday morning.

It could be that I enjoy cycling for a week, coasting between friends in the south, from my nest in Bournemouth to the concrete smoke of London. Maybe that'll be enough. Maybe I'll barely have time to catch a train to safety before the dread second wave winds through our communities.

It could be that I cycle on through East Anglia, pursuing the old roads to Lincoln and Durham and—if Scotland decides it's safe—even onward to Edinburgh and Elgin. Perhaps the clouds will roll over and I will cycle on for six weeks and come back sunburnt in September with a sack of stories to keep me busy for another decade.

If Covid-19 has taught us anything, it's to hold the future lightly. As the future tense in Arabic goes: insha'allah.

~

Under 'pacing' in my report card from 2011 you'll find the words 'could do better'. I cycled all day almost every day for nearly two months. I was permanently exhausted (my skin shrivelled up whenever I took a day off) and my encounters with Britain were more fleeting than I would have liked.

This year I'm taking the pace right down, concentrating more on the stories than on the distance. At a leisurely (!) 60km per day, six weeks is about enough time to trace half the country. If the tour is still safe and fun, I can continue with the second half in 2021. No rush.

The energy for this bike ride does not come from the physical challenge. It comes from a desire to understand the changes that have shaken this country. There's a lot that confuses me in 2020 Britain:

- What has lockdown done to our communities? What are we learning?
- What state are we really in after ten years of Conservative rule? Are our politicians helping us build the society we want? Where are we succeeding and where are we failing?
- How and why did we vote to leave the European Union? How are people taking this opportunity?
- How awesome are bikes? What are bikes doing to bring communities together?
- What, where and why is the north-south divide? And could Scotland thrive outside the United Kingdom?
- Do Britons really believe that Black Lives Matter? Mark Duggen was killed by police while I was cycling in 2011 and I remember watching the news footage at a hostel in the Shetland Isles. Is this time different?
- Are we turning the tide on climate change? Or is the tide turning us?
- How has life changed since I last cycled this way nine years ago?

I hope to hear all kinds of interesting perspectives from people I meet along the way, which I'll bring to you… somehow.

Although Covid-19 has made planning a last minute affair, I have been preparing the ground for more of a multimedia experience of storytelling this time around.

There will certainly be words; there may also be video and audio. Whatever happens, I'll let you know right here.

~

Finally: huge thanks to everyone who is helping to make this ride feel even remotely possible. Special thanks to A.C. for the ideas and company, The Tim Traveller for disturbing Youtube AUDIENCE advice, the Thighs of Steel family for oodles of inspiration and for the Wahoo, Documentally for my birthday microphone, and, of course, thanks to the Charles Family for the sense of home to which I will return. Insha'allah.

I know this mailing list is full of awesome people. If you'd like to offer support, please please please reply to this email. Any cycle tour leans heavily on the goodwill of strangers and I'm grateful for anything and everything—from kind words up!

If you'd like to catch up on the story of my first cycle around Britain, I wrote a book about the journey called Life to the Lees. Get 10 percent off with code SAVE10 if you order today.

May we all lead responsibly adventurous lives.

Insha'allah and praise be to science-based risk assessments.

Any more for any more?



Playing Out is a great campaign led by parents who want their kids to be able to play safely out on the streets. Like in olden times. The idea is that communities club together to agree a block of time when they won't drive on the roads.

There are so many reasons why this is a brilliant idea, helping children (and adults) reverse loneliness, health problems and inequality of access to open

space, while giving them opportunities for free play and independence. The campaign has a government petition we can sign.

Right. That's it! I'm going to try making a vegan chocolate mousse with only three ingredients: chocolate, lemon juice and bean juice. Sounds gross.

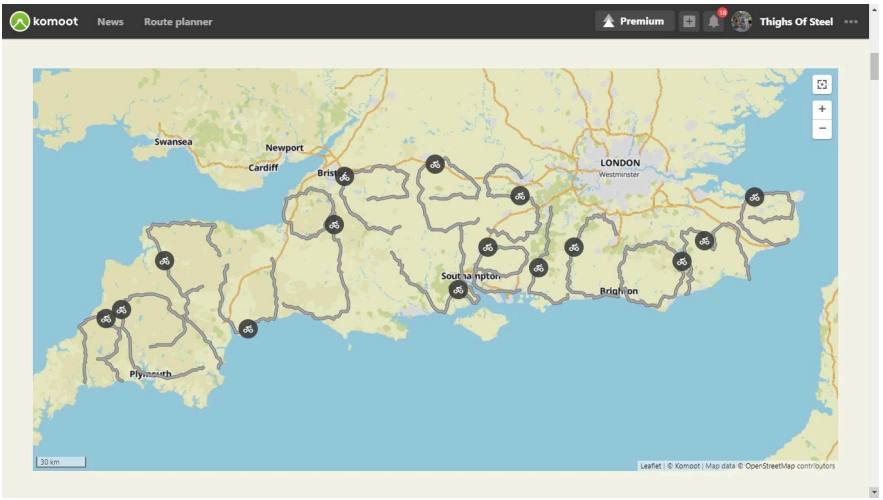
Big love,
dc:

No more ‘hostile environment’

4 June 2021

A lot has happened since the unexpectedly late running of edition 271, but most of it has involved carrying a six year old on my shoulders or trying to stop a two year old from discovering the hard end of a 4x4 (sometimes both at once). Entertaining in its own way, but not sufficient CONTENT for an entire newsletter.

Instead, I’ll tell you a bit more about Spell It Out, a 2,400km bike ride along the south coast of Britain that follows a quixotic route which will spell out the words—well, I’ll let you see for yourselves:



Yes - that is an actual bike route. Credit: GC and OKH!

No more ‘hostile environment’

The ride, organised by Thighs of Steel (obvs), is a direct response to our government’s creation of a ‘hostile environment’ for refugees.

Priti Patel is right now rushing through an overhaul of UK asylum law that will put us in direct opposition to the 1951 Geneva Convention on refugees, closing down legal routes to the UK for those fleeing political and religious persecution

as well as those who are trying to join family and friends already in this country. What does she think these people will do instead?

It's a complete horror show.

We need to tell Priti Patel and this pettifogging government that our country will always stand for tolerance and compassion and that we will continue to offer a safe haven for those fleeing their homes. We are stronger together and the tide will turn.

Join us any time—12 June to 26 September

If you would like to join Spell It Out as a fundraising cyclist, then hop on over to the Thighs of Steel website. You can sign up to ride any of the letters (100-240km each), with anyone you like, at any point between 12 June and 26 September. The more people who take part, the bigger our voice and the bigger our positive impact.

If you would like to show your support, then please share the website or crack open your wallet / PayPal and donate to my fundraising page (live now!). All of your money will go directly to organisations that offer refugees the warm welcome that our government withholds: legal advice, psychological counselling, vocational training, language lessons and more.

What's this about a Guinness World Record?!

The 2,400km route will also be the world's biggest ever GPS drawing by bike, smashing the previous record by about 1,600km. We're still thrashing out the logistical details, but please reply to this email if you're interested in helping us break a world record—we'll need cyclists, van drivers and overnight hosts across the south of England. Watch this space…

We identify as human beings

13 August 2021

Oddly enough, the thirteenth day of the month is most likely to occur on a Friday. Indeed, Friday 13 belongs to a rare group of the most frequently occurring dates in the 400-year cycle of the Gregorian Calendar.

Maths.

Read this story on my website

‘We identify ourselves as human beings’



On Monday I will hop onto a train and then into a car and travel down to St Austell for the beginning of the second longest bike ride of my life and the first that has required more than a few days’ planning.

Spell It Out, a 2,400km world record-breaking ride across the south of England, began as a hypothetical exercise during the Thighs of Steel Adventure Inventor application process back in March. Finally, after five months of intense communication, organisation and logistics, the cycling begins.

It’s a huge relief.

Compared to the uncertainty of sitting in front of a computer screen trying to convince people to go on a long bike ride, actually going on that long bike ride will feel like a doddle. Even when the elevation chart looks like this:



Since we launched the Spell It Out fundraiser in May, over fifty cyclists have collectively raised more than £24,600 for Choose Love. We're still some way off our target of £100,000, but I can feel the momentum building: we've raised nearly a grand in the past twenty-four hours.

~

I had an interesting chat this morning with a friend who works for Fat Macy's, a wonderful social enterprise currently raising funds to open a new training academy in East London.

We were talking about how charities, social enterprises and other projects that do what we called 'meaningful work' get funding, bemoaning the fact that it often depends on the indulgence of wealthy individuals or companies.

'High net worth' funders are the lifeblood of many charities and their directors and trustees will spend a significant amount of their time schmoozing with those who have spent their lives earning the big bucks and now want to 'give something back'.

Thighs of Steel has always been different. We don't actively seek wealthy backers and we deliberately set our ticket prices low, widening participation to include people who are unlikely to have high net worth networks of privilege.

We think it is important that we have ninety cyclists with big hearts rather than ten cyclists with deep pockets.

Because human beings are important.

~

Researching this story earlier today, I was struck by the words of lawyer Jack Pelele, writing on Refugee Action about his experience as a refugee in the UK asylum system:

> We must remember that behind our numbers and the fateful journeys we go through, we are people who have dreams, identify ourselves as human beings who were once useful to ourselves and our communities and can still be. Our value and worth do not end in victimhood or burden to those from whom we seek sanctuary.

Hang on — 'we identify ourselves as human beings' — I'm sorry, but how othered do you have to feel before you find yourself forced to assert your very humanity?

Well, funny you should ask. You see, Spell It Out has taken on a whole new level of urgency in recent weeks, as the government pushes forward with its barbaric overhaul of the asylum system.

If it passes without amendment, the Nationality and Borders Bill will put UK law in direct opposition to the 1951 Geneva Convention by criminalising people who arrive on these shores without a visa — even when they have a legitimate claim for asylum under international law.

In practice, there are no legal routes to asylum in the UK. And the only alternatives to legal routes to asylum are illegal. This government, and the right wing press, depend on this tauntology to justify their existence.

Tightening border control forces people into ever more desperate and dangerous routes to safety and the proposed bill will not only criminalise refugees themselves, but also any organisations or individuals who try to offer them safe harbour — including the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

And this comes on top of an asylum system that is already founded on detention and destitution.

How's that for othering?

~

Thighs of Steel aren't politicians, we're not law-makers — we're cyclists.

Over the next month, forty more cyclists will hit the road and help us create the world's largest ever GPS drawing, on a route that spells out 'Refugees Welcome' from Cornwall to Kent.

Without big money backers, our ninety-plus cyclists depend on a solidarity network of hundreds, thousands of friends and followers stumping up £5, £10, £50 of their hard-earned.

It's true that one millionaire can single-handedly transform the fortunes of a struggling project stripped of funding by the pandemic.

But thousands of small-time donors generate enough energy to show the world that the people of Britain still believe in compassion to those facing tragedy.

We think that's important.

Because we also identify as human beings.

~

Many thanks to everyone who are making Spell It Out possible: the hard-working Thighs of Steel clan; the hosts we'll be staying with, from Warmshowers and Workaways to farmers and friends; St Austell Holy Trinity Church for helping us with our Grand Depart and Migrant Help for meeting us at the finish line in Dover.

And, of course, bottomless thanks to the ninety-plus Thighs of Steel cyclists — and their donors — who are doing what they can.

Join us, if you can.

Admin or admiration?

21 August 2021

Greetings from Black Dog, Devon

Apologies for the late running of this service: yesterday I was too busy cycling to write and today I have been too busy recovering.

We are now 4 days into our 27 day bike-powered GPS drawing of Refugees Welcome and it's no coincidence that all the roads around here incorporate the word 'Hill'.

Copstone Hill, Cuckoo Hill, Polson Hill, Beech Hill Cross, North Hill Lane. (There's also a Cockrattle Lane, but that's a different story.)

Since our departure from St Austell on Tuesday, we've climbed over 6400m: coast to coast to coast through Cornwall, followed by a loop-the-loop of Dartmoor.



For those of you catching up, Thighs of Steel (of which I am a mere cog) are attempting to create the world's largest bike-powered GPS art by riding a serpentine route around the south of England that spells out the words 'Refugees Welcome'.

If we are successful, it will break the current world record by a completely unnecessary 1500km.

But, as they say, it's all for a good cause. We are fundraising for Choose Love, a charity that re-distributes donations to dozens of grassroots refugee projects in the UK and abroad.

These projects have been hit hard by the pandemic and would be completely unable to offer any services at all without the generosity of hundreds of individuals making small cash donations.

What's great about Choose Love is that they can send the money wherever it is needed NOW.

As you may have gathered from the news, forced migration happens suddenly and it's often the small grassroots projects that are best able to respond fast enough to help people when they need it most.

Thank you for all your donations - they are powering both our thighs and (more importantly) the work of these refugee support projects.

These first four days (we hope) will be the toughest of the whole tour, certainly in terms of distance and elevation, and I would be lying if I said that, at times, I have not reflected unfavourably upon my life choices.

Such as on Wednesday, when we cranked our way up two irrelevant hills to form the inlet of the 'R', only to return over the same exact same hills to finish off the tail.

And these are not hills in the sense that you might imagine if you live in the Home Counties, East Anglia, or even Scotland. These are Devonshire and Cornish hills. Road builders here seem to delight in driving you perpendicular to the contour lines. Not a zig-zag in sight, just a sheer wall of asphalt.

But the consolation in those absurd moments of repeated routing is not what we are doing, but why.

At the end of our hill reps on Wednesday, in the very butt of the R, a man called Ray Christmas signed our logbook. Ray Christmas!

Wait - the logbook? Ah, yes, the logbook! Every World Record Attempter's nightmare - literally.

I swear, two nights ago, I dreamt that Philip Schofield agreed to sign our logbook in exchange for sexual favours.

Schofield, aside, the logbook is the evidence Guinness need to verify our record. Every time we stop, we have to write that information into the logbook: date, time, distance travelled, location - and get that information signed off by an independent witness.

It's a lot of admin. Stop the GPS, check the time, check the distance, enter the time, enter the distance, add up today's distance to yesterday's total distance, eat half a flapjack, cast around for a human being who looks like not-a-dick.

Then we launch into The Spiel - 'Sorrytobotheryoudoyoumindmeaskingafavourwearetryingtobreakaworldrecord' - all the while gauging their eyes and frown lines for signs of curiosity and generosity or suspicion and derision.

No, this logbook is more than admin - it's a total ballache.

But, I confess, these witness signing ceremonies are often the highlight of our day.

The vicar of Holy Trinity, St Austell, who prayed for our steely thighs.

Luke and David at Bodmin steam railway, who donated £5 and a Thomas the Tank Engine flag.

The family in the wind and rain who donated halloumi fresh from their barbecue.

The woman wearing the Choose Love t-shirt in Boscastle - how could we not stop her?

The inestimable Janet Downes who carted us from R to E and donated homemade cheesy flapjacks.

Margitta and Nick and Lee and Laura and Pippa and Rolf and Bri and Penny who have hosted and roasted us in their warm homes.

Ian the accordian player from Of Stone And Earth in Chagford.

Debbie and Rob from the village shop in South Brent, who insisted on doing a Facebook Live with us and donated £10 and a bag of dark chocolate

gooseberries.

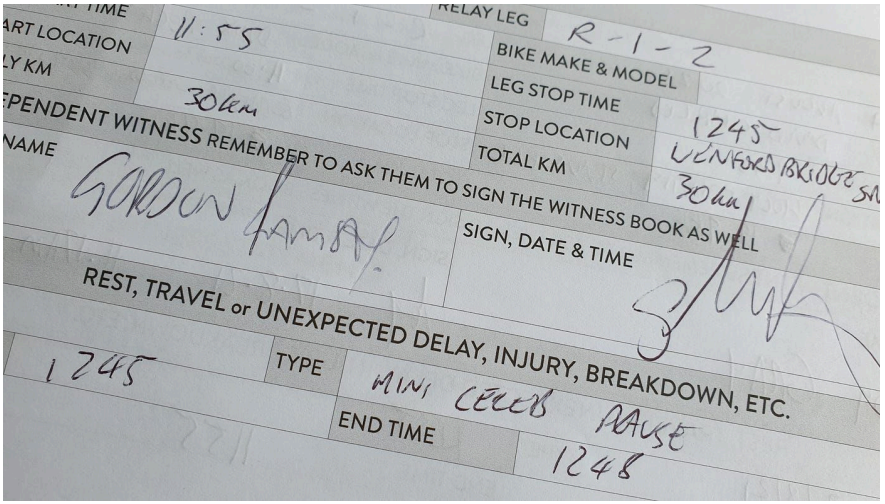
The volunteers at Spreyton community shop who donated two pieces of Bakewell Tart.

Gordon Ramsey.

Wait, what? Yes - TV celeb chef Gordon Ramsey. Spotted by Naomi out on a bike trail, enjoying a quiet cup of tea. At least he was enjoying a quiet cup of tea until Naomi fell off her bike in shock and I went up to him shouting 'Are you Gordon Ramsey?'

To be fair, he took it pretty well - better than I would have done if someone had come up to me and shouted 'Are you Gordon Ramsey?'

He signed our logbook, wished us well and gave me a fistbump. What more can you ask?



So, the logbook: yes, it's a chore, but it's also given us the moments that make this bike ride like no other bike ride.

This experience has made me want to make a logbook, a sort of a guestbook, for all my future rides too. How wonderful to make these connections as we pass through these villages and towns, how lucky.

I suppose it's all about how you look at the world, isn't it? My feelings about this baleful world record lurch, moment to moment, from admin to admiration.

Open minds, open hearts, open logbook.

Talking politics with strangers

4 September 2021

As the headline suggests, I usually publish this newsletter on a Friday, but I've got whatever the cycling equivalent of jetlag is. Bikelag.

Thighs of Steel finish our world record attempt on 18 September, so expect normal service to resume when I've recovered from that. Sometime in 2043, then.



Thighs of Steel cyclists outside Wells Cathedral. Photo: Dai Richards

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Talking politics with strangers

On Wednesday, we stayed with the wonderful Christine and Hayden in Alton (home of Sweet FA). We shovelled down a spectacular dinner in double quick time: Christine had invited a circle of friends to listen to our stories from the road.

I hadn't prepared a Powerpoint, so instead I gave a impromptu bugle recital and a depressing speech about the Nationality and Borders Bill.

One of the high points of this bike trip is having conversations about immigration and asylum with the people we meet.

It's great that everyone knows at least vaguely what's going on in Afghanistan at the moment, but not so many people understand how our government is ripping up the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees.

So here's my bullet point digest for you to share with friends:

- The new Nationality and Borders Bill is in direct contravention of the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees. This strikes me as a bit of a shame, given that the UK was one of only ten original signatories of this landmark document.
- The new Bill creates a two-tiered asylum system that distinguishes claims based on the means of entry to the UK rather than by whether the human being entering is actually in need of asylum. This prejudice is explicitly forbidden by Article 31 of the 1951 Convention.
- Should the new Bill pass, the only admissable refugees will be the few who arrive here on painfully limited resettlement schemes. For example, the government has committed to resettle 20,000 Afghans over 'the coming years'.
- The UK currently stands in nineteenth place in the European league table of asylum applications per capita of population, below Greece, Germany, France, Spain, Sweden, Belgium, Slovenia, Switzerland, Austria, Malta, Italy, Finland… You get the point.
- Even if the government's resettlement promises can be trusted — which they manifestly can't — the new Bill would send the UK spiralling even further down the list of safe nations for those fleeing war.
- Furthermore, under the new Bill, those who enter the UK 'irregularly' — i.e. without a passport and visa — will have their asylum cases deemed 'inadmissable' and the government will try to deport them.
- If you are a refugee, it is essentially impossible to enter the UK with a passport and visa. Do you imagine those fleeing Afghanistan had time to apply for a visa on their way out? The result: the asylum claim of every

refugee coming to this country under their own steam will be 'inadmissable'.

- If the government simply can't get rid of them (because their freakin homes are on fire!), then these people will be allowed to apply for asylum… but…
- Even if these irregular arrivals are ultimately awarded refugee status, they will never be given the right to settle here and will be regularly reassessed for removal. Again: this prejudice is explicitly forbidden by the 1951 Convention because it's manifestly unfair.

The British were very successful at promulgating the myth that their Empire was founded on good will and fair play. This was always a gargantuan lie, but it's a lie that this government seems particularly eager to expose with the extraordinary cruelty and arbitrary injustice of its Nationality and Borders Bill.

Every time we stop the GPS for a bike break — lunch wraps, punctures, bedtime — we need to get our logbook signed off by a member of the public. This means that we talk to a lot of people about what we're doing.

At the beginning of the trip, we were both a bit worried about discussing refugees with any old stranger on the street.

The anti-immigration, anti-asylum right wing press is the most popular in the country and, naturally, we thought that these newspapers would reflect the views of their readers. Not only that, but the elected government of this country is run by a man that the BBC can, without fear of slander, describe as 'a liar and a racist'.

Therefore, basic probability told us that a good chunk of our unsuspecting witnesses would hold strong, negative views on the right of refugees to claim asylum in this country.

Approaching a stranger to ask for their signature and contact details is pretty daunting when you think there's a 50/50 chance that they'll hate everything about what you're doing.

As the trip has gone on, however, we've come to the heartening conclusion that The Daily Mail and the Conservative Party can't possibly reflect the real views of

the people of this country.

We've not done a survey, but it's statistically fantastic that zero of the 114 people in our witness book neither read the country's most popular newspapers nor vote for the most popular political party.

Yet the vast majority of people we've met on this bike ride show great compassion towards those forced to flee their homes. Indeed: most people tell us that they think the government should be doing more to help.

This government, and the billionaire-owned press that goads them on, are not only heartlessly vindictive, but they foment a social atmosphere that divides us and makes us scared to share our true political beliefs with each other.

This trip has not only given me the strength to approach strangers and open up political conversations, but also the confidence that they won't rip my head off. Far from it.

If we are going to defeat the Nationality and Borders Bill — and the countless others that this government are yet to write — then we need to be able to trust each other.

This bike trip has shown me that we can.

So let's.

The Magic Cobbler & More Philoxenia

23 July 2022

👋 My name is David and I'm a writer, outdoor instructor and cyclist-at-large with Thighs of Steel. I write stories that help you and me understand the world (and ourselves) a little better.

At least that's what I normally do.

But for the next couple of months I'm actually cycling to Athens, as part of Europe's longest charity bike ride.

5,000km, a hundred people, through ten countries, over nine weeks gives me a lot of time to experience things, but not a lot of time to write things.

So I'm afraid that this newsletter will be a little more sporadic than usual: I'll write when I have more than a moment to string together sentences.

Today I happened to wake up at 5am — so here we all are!

We started the ride last Saturday morning and yesterday we finished the first leg, arriving in Bristol in an absolute ecstasy of a downpour, raindrops the size of popcorn.

You can follow the ride on the Thighs Instagram, Facebook or my own personal agony, ecstasy and knee cramp via the Strava updates on my fundraising page. (Ahem.)



Britain is beautiful by bike

Philoxenia

Philoxenia is the wonderful Greek concept of generosity and friendship towards strangers, guests, gods, gods in disguise, foreigners, travellers and friends of friends of cousins of friends.

I've written before about philoxenia and my own solo experiences of bicycle touring (here and here), but, when travelling with sixteen other cyclists and a bloody great van, the generosity of strangers towards strangers that we receive rises to truly Homeric standards.

It's hard — impossible — to pay tribute to myriad of kindnesses, large and small, seen and unseen, that the people of Glasgow, Dumfries and Galloway, Cumbria, Lancashire, Shropshire and Wales showered down upon us over the past 750km, but here are a few that rise to mind this morning.

June in Hesket Newmarket who let us use her campsite free of charge, 'Consider it my donation', her fridge-temperature bathroom papered with sheep-based cartoons and proud newspaper cuttings of Prince Charles.

The elderly woman in Windermere who wasn't quite sure how to use her garden hose, but, once shown, took over the task of hosing down our oven-hot cyclists with a cackling child-like relish.

Steve The Magic Cobbler in Preston who not only sorted us out with a new set of van keys (don't ask), but also performed card tricks while we waited.

Paula, Paula, Pauline and Keith at The Kathleen & May Heritage Museum in Connah's Quay for letting us doss on their floor, surrounded by exhibits on the River Dee and the local paint industry. Thanks too for the fried-up breakfast butties that put our porridge to shame.

Fathomless thanks to the communities at Claver Hill and Three Pools who hosted us in Lancaster and Abergavenny, and to Phil and Bec who Warmshowered us on the hills overlooking Offa's Dyke near Montgomery. If you'll have us, we'll be back.

Joe at Rogue Welsh Cakes for donating three dozen exquisite Welsh cakes. I wish I could say that they'd been savoured, but after seven straight days of cycling, they were mainly devoured as delicious calories. Luckily, Joe does postal orders for easy at-home savouring.

In fact: thank you to all the strangers who heard about the ride and handed us cash donations in solidarity with refugees, asylum seekers and other people forced from their homes. The purest form of philoxenia: stranger to never met stranger.

All the pub landlords who patiently filled our water bottles and waved us in to empty our bursting bladders. There are now fewer than 40,000 pubs in England and Wales for the first time since the opening of the Domesday Book (probably).

Even as someone who doesn't drink much, that feels like a bit of a shame, particularly for the countryside communities that we cycled through. We'll keep on buying chips and Scampi Fries.

Finally: thanks to the rivers and lakes, the woods and fields, the mountains and valleys, the road and hedgerow, the wing, feather, snout, hoof and fur, the wild and the tame that swaddled us all in gentle cradle, wrapping the journey in threaded cloth of nurture and nature.

Carpocratian Touring

19 August 2022

The second century followers of the gnostic Carpocrates believed that human souls must go through every possible earthly experience before they are released and return to god's side in heaven.

For most ordinary people, this means reincarnation after reincarnation as they labour through tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich, poor, beggar, thief. But the Carpocratians tried to pack everything — absolutely everything — into a single lifetime.

I know how they feel.

Thighs of Steel is an undertaking of Carpocratian magnitude and the last month has seen a total of 48 cyclists riding 2611km from Glasgow to Milan.

Over a hundred kilometres a day, packed into twenty-five heatdawn, overdrawn days.

So please accept my sincere apologies for not writing to you the last couple of weeks.

I am now taking a break from cycling while the ride continues from Milan to Dubrovnik without me.

This break will be amply — even excessively — filled with the frantic gathering of thoughts as I seek to process what on earth has happened over the past month.

Also sleep.

👋 My name is David and I'm a writer, outdoor instructor and cyclist-at-large with Thighs of Steel. I write stories that help you and me understand the world (and ourselves) a little better.

Turning Points

I'm writing today from a farmhouse near Garlasco, a quiet town in a quiet corner of Lombardy, totally unremarkable to the locals, but nevertheless subject

to a constant stream of remarks from me and my British companions, evenly split by topic between the heavenly pizza and the hellish mosquitoes.

Since I last wrote, our fundraising cyclists have covered every inch of the road (and sometimes gravel) between Bristol and Milan.

The change in scenery has been mildly dramatic:



Lovebrook Farm, our last night in England, on the chalk downs of Sussex



Climbing the Col du Mont Cenis (2083m), over the Alps, from France into Italy

Putting those two photos side by side gives an impression of distinct and dramatic movement. One moment your eyes are on the downs, the next on the Alps.

It looks like a clear and obvious turning point: that moment in a story where everything changes forever.

But that's in stories.

On a bike ride, change is infinitesimal and incremental and our wheels are always turning.

Between that first and second photograph, we got up out of our tents, ate breakfast, did some cycling, ate some food, did some more cycling, drank our water bottles, refilled our water bottles, did more cycling, put on sun cream, did more cycling, ate dinner, went to sleep, woke up, got up out of our tents, ate breakfast, did some cycling, ate some food…

For two weeks.

There are no turning points — except those we choose to recognise after the fact for the purpose of understanding our lives, for telling our story.

Making sense of our experiences is one of the reasons I love writing to you and why it's a shame in a way that the past three weeks have been so full of life.

I wonder if the Carpocratians allowed themselves any time to process, or whether 'storyteller' fell outside their definition of earthly experience.

Writing gives us a moment to put down a marker, recognise some turning point in experience or learning, and help us understand how what we're doing fits into the universe at this moment in space/time.

So here are four turning points from this journey, one for each week of the ride so far.

Glasgow to Bristol: A Short Ride Across Town



The two months before this ride began were stressful.

In the manic weeks in the run-up to our departure, I wrote myself (and you) letters about the electromagnetism of responsibility and the need to replace control with trust, but I still arrived in Glasgow with a sneeze-cold.

Thirty blood tests, five Covid tests and two courses of antibiotics did nothing to alleviate the stress I felt, nor resolve the question uppermost in my mind: forget

the century of cyclists signed up to ride, would I be able to take care of *myself* over the next 5,000km?

I needed, or thought I needed, a holiday.

Then, before we were anywhere near ready, it was already time to cycle across town to meet the first week's cyclists at Glasgow youth hostel.

Spinning wheels, one, two, three kilometres. Friday rushhour, Clyde summer sunshine, giddy core team.

This short ride turned inertia to momentum, old questions to new, and blind doubt to blind faith.

By the time we crossed into Dumfries and Galloway, the stress was gone. The sneezes followed stress into the wind the next day.

Bristol to Paris: Cheese On Toast



That first week was tough. Thighs of Steel had never ridden so far in a week before: 754km with an Everest of climbing. In a heatwave.

But we had done it.

Together we had done it — and we had raised a lot of money in solidarity with refugees in the process. Most of the cyclists on the Glasgow to Bristol leg raised over £1,000 each.

In the heat of the struggle, the cycling had taken every ounce of our strength, while daily disasters had taken every ounce of our ingenuity and saying goodbye to fast firm friendships had taken every ounce of our social emotional energy.

And now we had to do it all over again, with ten complete strangers.

The turning point of this second week was relearning how quickly we humans can go from utterly depleted to utterly repleted.

Hunger draining our legs. Heat draining our minds. Off-road gravel draining bashed bikes. Then a smashed GPS screen.

We freewheel downhill to a cafe marked as 'open' on the map. Desperation for water-fillers and stomach-fillers.

Cafe's closed.

Back up the hill, in silence.

Another cafe.

They only serve cheese on toast.

No matter: water at least, tea at least, shade at least.

But wait. This isn't cheese. This is Cheese. This isn't a cafe, this is The Milk Churn, home of Sussex Charmer.

Fifteen cyclists tucked well in. Even the vegans. Powered all the way to Lovebrook.

Turning point: there is nothing that can't be fixed by comfort food. (Except perhaps smashed GPS computer screens: for that you'll need Laka cycle insurance.)

It's not inconceivable that the success of the first week from Glasgow to Bristol was a fluke. But Bristol to Paris showed us that the Thighs method works.

Fresh croissants at dawn, demi-bottles of lunchtime wine, massage circles at sundown.

Something in the alchemy of the way Thighs of Steel was founded attracts people with not only a strong, positive and collaborative work ethic, but one that's paired with equal parts joy.

Paris to Lyon: Pineapple Chess



Sometimes the most signficant turning points are scarcely more than a dramatic inflection, an almost imperceptible change of emphasis, but one that leaves an important, lasting impression on our experience.

Paris to Lyon was exactly that, for me at least. It was fun, actual *fun*, cycling with friends old and new for a week through Comté, Beaujolais and Tour de France country.

Days in the hot saddle chatting shit, inventing songs, playing games: 'I've got a business', one word stories, Pineapple Chess. Nights wild camping under stars, nuzzled by donkeys, rescue piglets and other tame animals.

That's not to say that it wasn't a tough week. But when you're having fun, things just flow, right?

It's a virtuous circle of energy: other people love to gather around fun and, when people gather together, problems get solved easily, almost before anyone's noticed there was ever a problem.

That was the turning point of Paris to Lyon. And, if you want the rules to Pineapple Chess, that'll be a subscriber-only post 😂

Every penny made from all new subscribers will go into our MASS Action fundraiser in solidarity with refugees, asylum seekers and other people on the move across Europe.

Lyon to Milan: No Ikaría



I was worried about crossing the Alps on my bicycle.

The Scottish Lowlands, the Lake District and Hay Bluff are one thing: the French and Italian Alps are quite another. Not helped by the realisation that I hadn't even taken a dump on a serious mountain range since, ooh… 1990.

Now: I've always been proud of my heavyweight cruiser of a bicycle, but with some of the others riding carbon, I was a little nervous to be giving away an eight kilo handicap before we even left the start line.

I was so worried, in fact, that my bowels occupied the first 24 hours of the week unavoidably voiding themselves and I was forced to spend the first long, hot, flat day in the van.

But early the next morning, sitting in the Alpine garden of our hosts Pierre and Pascal (found through slow travel hosting site Welcome To My Garden), madly trying to swallow down the prospect of more than 2,000m of climbing in the day, I decided to seek inspiration from all the other tough rides I've ever done.

As I shoveled soothing porridge into my belly, I searched Strava, where I record most of my ride data, by elevation climbed.

I was pleasantly surprised. The rides I did last year through Cornwall and Devon were similar total elevation and, in fact, steeper climbs.

But nothing in the Alps — nothing — could be tougher, or even be close to being as tough as the ride I'd done three years ago on the Greek island of Ikaria: nearly 3,000m of steep climbing, in hot summer sun, increasingly off road.

The Alps, I decided, with their smooth roads and steady switchbacks, would be a cinch.

And so it proved.

Okay, so 'cinch' might sound like an overstatement, but when you're riding in a generous community, always ready with a joke, a song or a word of encouragement, the metres and miles dissolve into the road.

And, besides, even in the toughest moments, there's always the scenery.



Routine Strength

It's fair to say that I started out on this journey pretty worried. As an organiser, worried about all the things that could go wrong with the ride, but also increasingly worried about whether I personally would have the strength to see it through.

The last time I was part of the Thighs of Steel core team, back in 2019, I was also worried — and amazed, amazed to discover that, rather than being depleted, exhausting day by exhausting day, sleepless night by sleepless night, my strength only grew over the weeks, until I was fit to burst as we rode into Athens.

But 2019 was a long time ago. Much has changed. Would those wells run so deep?

As we rolled on and on, I was relieved. They do.

Humans are amazingly adaptable animals and even our relentless routine — early starts, big climbs, late nights — has become quotidian, tapping into fathomless reservoirs of energy that my daily life never needs.

And I'm not special. This isn't something unique that my brainbody does.

As we sweated and strained our way up to the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, dominating in gold and glass the skyline of Lyon, one of the cyclists remarked: 'I can't wait to go on more adventures like this — now I know what I'm capable of!'

Because I'm an irritating contrarian, I had to disagree with her.

'No you don't. That's the whole point. You've cycled 600km in six days, in a heatwave, and you still haven't hit the wall. You have *no idea* what you're capable of.'

And learning that is one hell of a turning point.

What must terrify us most as humans is not how little can be done, not how powerless or puny our lives are, but rather how great and signficant, especially when we join together and reach for limits out of reach.

Have you hit the wall? Have you reached your limit?

I don’t believe you.

Not A Charity Auction

23 September 2022

And greetings from Athens.



It's been quite the ride.

Thighs of Steel, a rolling community of fundraising cyclists, left Glasgow on 16 July and arrived in Athens on 17 September.

Over the course of 49 days, 95 cyclists rode a cumulative 71,337km and climbed up 757,975 metres of elevation, the equivalent of more than 85 Everests.

Powered by 781 bowls of porridge, 11kg of peanut butter and untold megatons of pastries to fill a 2,341,500 calorie cycling deficit.

Brought together by at least 34 punctures (including one tyre pin-cushioned by 15 thorns along one apocalyptic goat track), 435 tent erections at 42 camp spots, plus two saline drips and a butt jab during one of two trips to A&E.

Together we have raised £94,574 and we're open for donations for another few weeks before distributing the money to solidarity communities working with refugees and other people on the move in Athens, the UK and northern France.

👋 My name is David and I'm a writer, outdoor instructor and cyclist-at-large with Thighs of Steel. I write stories that help you and me understand the world (and ourselves) a little better.

Today's story is about what Thighs of Steel does in the world (hint: it's not cycling) and, inadvertently, how you might zoom out from the particular to uncover the universal purpose to everything you do as a human.

It's big picture stuff, so I've illustrated the story with seven photographs taken by cyclists on the ride. You can find more on Instagram. Enjoy.

Not A Charity Auction



CREDIT: Zeina Hawa (Glasgow to Bristol)

A lot of people ask what it is that Thighs of Steel do and the answer is that the answer is different for everyone involved.

But here's my answer.

We're Not Movember

Thighs of Steel is a fundraising organisation. The way we fundraise is to organise bike adventures to give people an excuse to invite their friends to donate in solidarity with refugees.

Yet, in those two sentences alone, there is a contradiction.

If we wanted to maximise our fundraising potential, instead of spending nine months planning a bike trip, we'd throw all our energy and resources into schmoozing at charity auctions for High Net Worth individuals in The City.

Or, even better, we'd create mass participation events, like Movember or the World's Biggest Coffee Morning, rather than a logistically complex continental adventure that is forceably capped at 96 participants.

Ergo: Thighs of Steel is not purely a fundraising organisation because, if it were, it'd be a horribly inefficient one. There's something else going on.



CREDIT: *Grace Compton (Glasgow to Milan)*

We're Not A Cycle Club Either

Thighs of Steel was formed as a Community Interest Company and, on our registration documents, this is how we describe our public benefit:

> All communities within the United Kingdom stand to benefit from our company as our bike rides are open to people of all ages and fitness levels to join.
>
> There are rides of different degrees of difficulty to challenge experienced cyclists and also encourage and include those who are new to cycling.
>
> The individuals who participate and also those who follow our activities will benefit as we are promoting and encouraging healthy activities and challenges.
>
> As well as health benefits, we are also promoting environmentally friendly travel (travelling by bicycle) which aims to inspire people to use their own bodies, thereby encouraging lives with a low carbon footprint, which has a positive impact on the whole community.

All of this is true, but there's no at all mention of fundraising, the very reason Thighs was set up in the first place!

This is because the donations we raise don't exclusively benefit UK populations and therefore fall outside the cut-and-paste regulatory requirements of a CIC.

And this isn't the only time that our two primary activities of fundraising and cycling feel like they're in competition with each other.



CREDIT: *Catriona Mallows*

Are We Fundraising Or Cycling Here Or What?

During the difficult moments, sweating through the Lake District, struggling up the Dolomites or vomiting into a toilet in Albania, it can take a certain amount of effort to remember why we're doing this horrible thing: caught up in effort, we forget why we're fundraising.

Conversely, at peak moments, during sunshine descents, pistachio ice cream or geothermal sea baths, many of us feel a guilty tension between our personal joy and the difficult reality of daily life for refugees, the people we're riding in solidarity with.

Both forgetfulness and guilt are dangerous states of mind that can sap our appetite to do anything at all, whether productive or pointless, difficult or delightful.

At its worst, our activities could seem pretty crass: a bit of fundraising bolted on to a cheap bike holiday.

But rather than try to resolve this tension between our stated aims of fundraising and cycling, let's zoom out to a wide perspective where we'll see them feeding into each other as two expressions of a third, much greater, purpose.



CREDIT: *Linde Geerinck*

Zoom Zoom Zoom Out

Up close, things look disconnected. It's only by zooming out that we can see the connecting lines between everything that we do.

This applies to our personal lives as much as the operational activities of a non-profit.

By zooming out, we can see what a £5 online donation from your cousin Frank has in common with rubbing someone's back while they throw up into a toilet bowl.

The connection is connection.

One of the Thighs cyclists this year was Naoum Sayegh, a Syrian engineer who lived for 11 years in Lebanon before moving to the UK not long before Covid.

As well as being a great part of our little bike crew, Naoum is also super enthusiastic about embracing British culture, but until now has found authentic connection with his fellow citizens hard to find.

> London is very individualistic so I don't have the same social fabric as I had in the Middle East. I felt very isolated living in London alone. So, when I joined the ride, one of my main goals was to build this connection with British cyclists.

He wasn't disappointed:

> Cycling together and aiming to reach the same goal, reaching our destination and fundraising for refugees, brought everyone together and created a sense of intimacy that's very difficult to find within British communities in England.

And because every night Thighs of Steel throw ourselves on the generosity of the communities we land in, Naoum was also able to connect with complete strangers across Britain (or at least along that thread of cycle road that connects Glasgow and Bristol).

> Camping at community farms and being hosted by locals really helped me see the UK from a different perspective.
>
> When we stopped at Claver Hill Community Farm in Lancaster, they cooked us a delicious meal with vegetables from the farm and gave us some outstanding apple cider — how sweet!
>
> Then I sat down with the hosts and had a very interesting conversation about how they live and how community functions outside of London.

> Being pampered by our hosts created a connection that is very important.

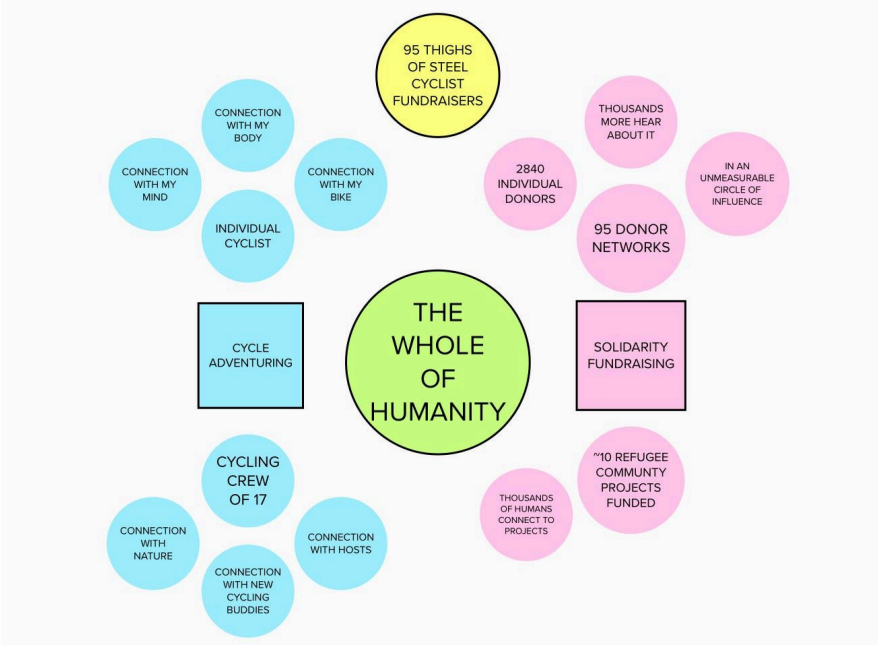


CREDIT: *Jim Yeoman*

Let Me Count The Ways

Naoum counts two obvious ways that Thighs of Steel fosters connection: within the tight team of cyclists and with our camping hosts.

But there's much, much more.



Cycling connects me as an individual to my own mind (agh, why won't this hill stop!) and my own body (yes! I am strong!), as well as to my bike (another snapped gear cable!).

As Naoum said, over the course of a tough week of cycling, groups bond through both joy and adversity: one of the incredible things about organising this trip is seeing week after week of cyclists arrive as strangers and leave as friends.

These connections can last a week; they can last a lifetime.

Naoum mentioned our hosts, but what of the hundreds of people who helped us with directions, pastries, water or a smile? Every single one a spark of a connection, acknowledgement of something shared, and inducement to share in return.

The ride also connects us to the world, to its nature and construction: the landscapes we pass through, the tortoises we protect from onrushing cars, the wind, the weather, the birds of prey, the waves of the ocean, the kittens.

We leave the ride more connected to ourselves, to each other and to the rest of reality.

That's a whole lot of connection already, but solidarity fundraising is in itself another gargantuan act of connection.

The 95 cyclists all set up fundraising pages and invited their wide networks of friends, family and casual acquaintances to participate by donation.

The most successful pages used creative strategies to connect communities and pull people into the project: parties, wine tastings, raffles.

Even those who never donated still heard about the ride and its purpose in an unmeasurable circle of influence that reaches out still.

Connection on connection.

And finally, of course, the money raised is funnelled directly into refugee projects specifically set up to foster connection and community.

Thousands of people will connect with those projects over the coming year and, being humans, the connections that they find will help make the world a better place for us all.

It's not just cycling, it's not just fundraising, it's not just a £5 donation and it's not just rubbing someone's back while they vomit into an Albania toilet.

It's connection.



CREDIT: *Georgie Cottle*

Only Connect

Connection, for me, is the purpose of Thighs of Steel. In fact, it's what drives pretty much everything I do.

When I'm confused about why I'm doing something, I try to see how it will help me connect with the universe around me.

It's usually not hard: everything we do connects us. If you want to get really zoomed out, then every act that you're a part of is a small contribution to the workings of the cosmos.

The point is to amplify those connections and make them as generative as possible.

~

If you want to connect to this story, then my fundraising page is still open. Annoyingly, I'm £50 short of my target 🥰



CREDIT: *Jim Yeoman*

Lies And The What What Now Now

30 September 2022

And greetings from a wood-built house improbably homed beneath the largest icefall in Europe.

When I look out of the window, my view runs right into the massif, four kilometres straight up, that hides Mont Blanc, the highest peak in Western Europe.

Waterfall dumps ice. Pine seeds clouds. Woman runs dog.

It's a lot.



👋 My name is David and I'm a writer, outdoor instructor and cyclist-at-large with Thighs of Steel. I write stories that help you and me understand the world (and ourselves) a little better.

Today's story is about lies and the what now.

Lies And The What What Now Now

Last week I told you no lies. But perhaps I was sparing with the truth.

I said that Thighs of Steel left Glasgow on 16 July and arrived in Athens on 17 September.

Truth.

I also said that 95 cyclists rode a cumulative 71,337km over the course of 49 days.

Also truth.

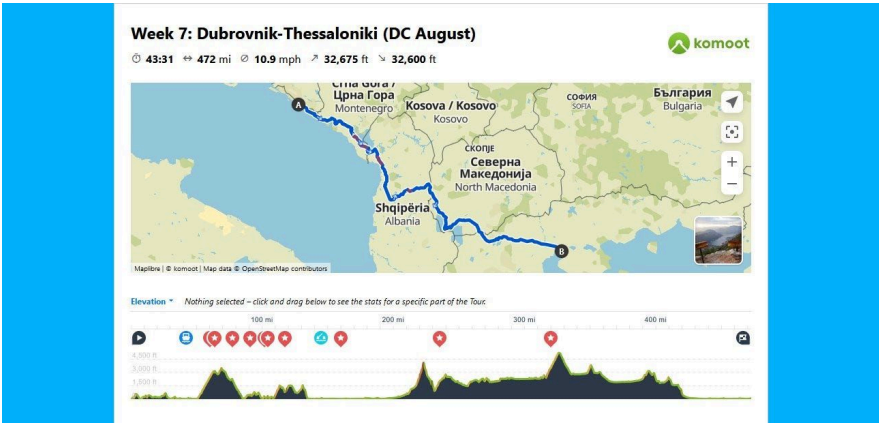
But there's a gap between the truth and the whole truth, right? You know what I mean.

In those 49 days, we didn't quite cycle all the way from Glasgow to Athens — even after you excuse us the cross-Channel ferry.

We missed a bit.

Let me take you back to Dubrovnik and the beginning of Week 7.

Probably A Hill / Gravel / Borek



Covering the 800km between Dubrovnik, Croatia and Thessaloniki, Greece inside one week was always going to be a big ask.

And not just because of the distance.

The mountains of Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia barred our way to the cotton and pomegranate plains of northern Greece.

Oh, and all this on a route we'd never done before, on roads that could run out at any moment.



Albania. Go. Now.

Naturally, it was hands-down the most popular week of the trip, selling out on day one on this hapless promise of unknowable adventure:

> This is the week for people who LOVE not knowing what's around the corner (clue: probably a hill / gravel / borek).
>
> We've never been to North Macedonia before (have you?) so we've no idea what to expect, but the internet tells us it's freakin' gorgeous (if a bit hilly). We're looking forward to the endless views and the bottomless mountain lakes.
>
> As ever, we don't know where we're staying each night until that day, so we may be welcomed into homes, adopted by villages or wild camping beside a river. Expect to meet extremely friendly strangers and strangers who are extremely confused by us.

Before The Lake

After two days climbing through Montenegro, including the sixteen switchbacks of the Kotor Serpentine, we camped on the edge of Lake Shkodër, right on the border with Albania.

We arrived at camp in time to blow up the inflatable aubergine (yep), chuck a frisbee around in the shallows and then, because apparently we weren't tired enough after a 97km ride, embark on a ~~leisurely~~ grueling swim out to a rocky island.

About halfway across, I was reminded that, over water, however distant your destination seems to appear, you should triple it.



The guilty Lake Shkodër (Montenegrin side)

The evening sun hurt our backs, the lake weeds caught our strokes, the vast current clubbed our legs.

We struggled back from the island, crawled ashore like wet things from the pleistocene, and collapsed into a pot of dinner as mosquitoes danced.

Within 15 hours of that ill-advised swim, I was fixed to a drip in an Albanian hospital while my friend was being jabbed in the butt with a needle of drugs.



The Author, On His Death Trolley

After The Lake

We think we picked up the stomach bug from dirty water in the lake, but who knows.

What is certain is that, although almost everyone managed to cycle the 130km from Lake Shkodër to Tirana, by midnight all but five of the party were stricken.

There are no days off on Thighs of Steel, but there was no way we were going to cycle any further the next day.

Thighs of Steel, maybe, but bellies of jelly. Or worse.

A rest day was the only option.

Luckily, we had found a bucolic campsite up in the foothills of Mount Dajti, populated with ducks, chickens and a clutch of (now) horrified campervanners.

The proprieter was a jolly woman who, after seeing our condition, mocked us for not being able to handle our alcohol. When we revealed the true extent of our indisposition, she was appalled — until we explained that we'd picked up the bug in Montenegro.

'Ah, *Montenegro*!' she cackled. And restocked the toilet paper.

By the evening, most people were able to prop themselves up on an elbow and nibble a little plain pasta. A couple of us managed a game of Bananagrams. Some mad cats even cycled down to the city for a tour of the fleamarkets.

We called council and made the decision that anyone who could hold down the morning porridge could ride on the next day — with the proviso that Calypso, our beloved support van, would scoop up any strugglers.

But our recovery day meant we were travelling one day behind schedule.

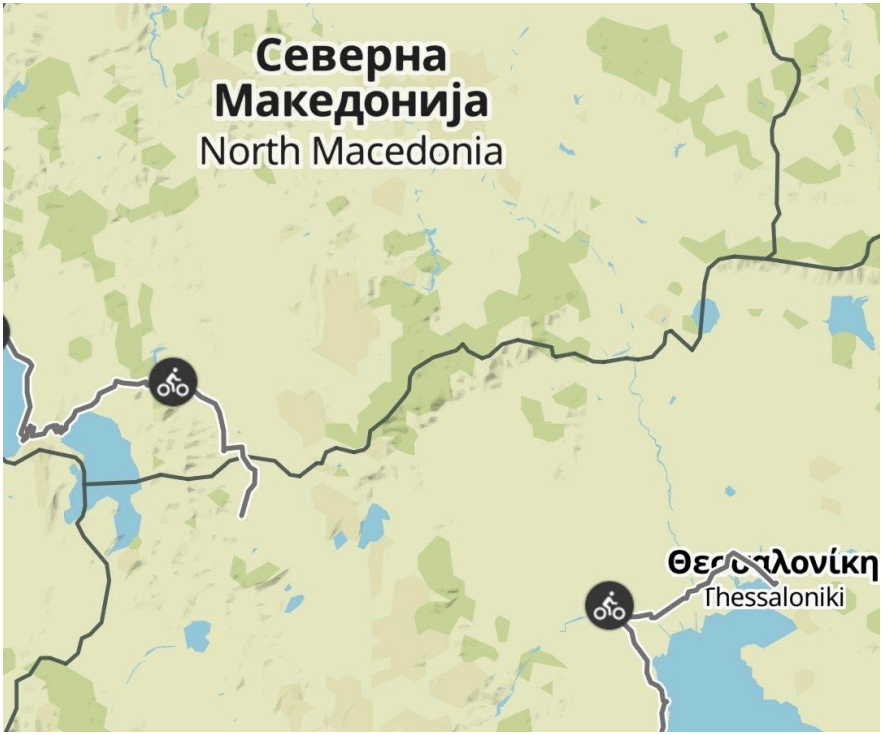
In our fragile condition there was no way that we could make up the time, so, instead of reaching Thessaloniki on the seventh day, we ended the ride in Florina, a hot, flat ride over the border from Macedonia.

Then we caught a train.

In Thessaloniki, we snatched one last dinner together before saying our goodbyes.

The next day we welcomed the final week's cyclists and rode six days to Athens.

5,304km from Glasgow, but somehow missing something...



Connecting The Dots

Why is it that we feel compelled to finish things?

Why, on Monday, did I feel compelled to take a train from Athens to Thessaloniki, meet fellow core teamer Fen, drive Calypso to Alexandreia, park her up in a quiet suburb and catch another train with our bikes to Florina — only to turn around after a night's sleep and ride 124km (into a strong headwind) back to Alexandreia, thereby linking Week 7 to Week 8 and making an unbroken land route of 5,428km all the way from Glasgow to Athens?

I don't know. But it felt really good. And not just because of roads like this:



It felt good to honour the ride that was a year in the making. It felt good to honour the other cyclists who couldn't ride the full route during Week 7.

It felt good to take to the roads again and remember the purity of why we do this without the frantic circus that comes with riding in a large group.

It felt good to join the dots.

We have now raised £96,964 and if you want to help us join the dots to our £100,000 fundraising target for refugee solidarity charity MASS Action, you can donate here.

I know times are tough for pretty much everyone right now, but every donation makes a difference. Take these examples of what a donation could do for the Khora community spaces in Athens:

- £10 buys 20kg of fresh fruit and veg to serve at the Khora community kitchen, free for anyone who needs a hot meal with friendly faces
- £50 covers the costs of running the Khora Asylum Support Team for a day, providing vital, free legal support to asylum seekers in Athens
- £100 pays the electricity, water and gas bills at the Khora kitchen for a fortnight

- £250 covers food supplies needed at the Khora kitchen for a whole month

It does feel good to have connected the dots, to have finished a project. Like, *really* finished it.

But now, sitting improbably beneath a glacier, I've come to that other moment, where one project ends and I feel…

The What What Now Now

Well, the immediate what what now now is that I need to get to a secret location on the edge of the Morvan in central France. There, awaiting repair, is Calypso, fallen at the last, with oil spewing from her undercarriage.

But once the mechanics have been called, once the vehicle has been recovered, once she limps onto the ferry and makes her tired, troubled way back home, and I have, perhaps, showered and slept, then I will be faced with the what what now now.

Projects like Thighs of Steel take everything you've got, all thrown into a threshing machine, and scattered, in this case, across barren gravel tracks from the Clyde to the Acropolis.

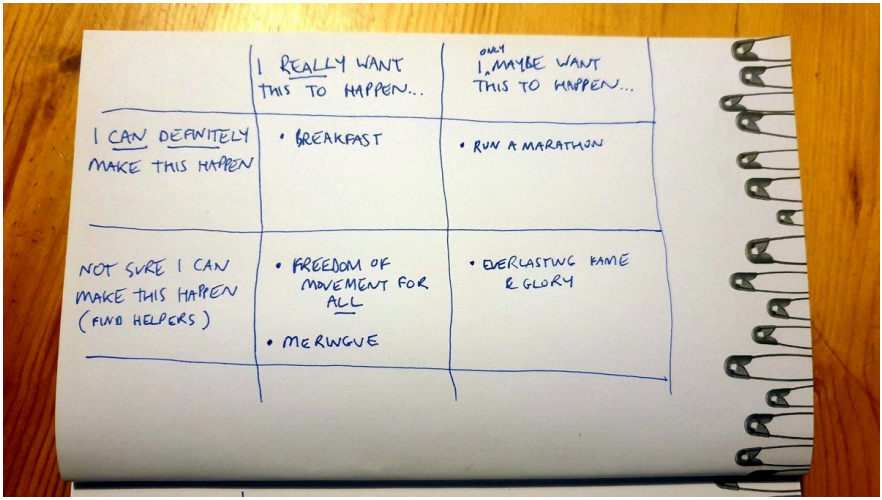
During this grisly process, something powerful and enduring is created from the entrails of the various participants — no doubt about that — but it can take some time for everyone to regenerate.

In the meantime, while livers and kidneys and stem cells are doing their surreptitious work, the rest of the world, friends, family and lovers from back home look on and ask of us the what what now now.

The answer is I don't know know now now.

But I do have some ideas, generated from a grid I made, which I'll share because you might also find it useful if you're having trouble figuring out your own what what now now.

To avoid jinxing all my nascent plans, here's an empty one, drawn in the back of a notebook designed in Tehran, bought in Athens:



Get stuck in. Add or change the columns and rows until you have your own full-on personalised Zwicky Box of What What Now Now.

~

Thanks to everyone involved, to Fen and the tortoise, also to Tim Ten Yen, and of course The Much Much How How And I.

The 3 (Or 4) Species of Happiness

7 October 2022

And greetings from, well, the United Kingdom.

It's been exactly three months since I was last 'home' and two months since I left this island.

Anything big happen since I left?

Let's see now...

HOLY CRAP.

- Work on the world's largest windfarm was completed off the coast of Yorkshire. It's record will superseded by another being built off these shores next year.
- Waltham Forest became the first council in the UK to divest fossil fuels from their pension fund.
- A trial showed that Oxford University's malaria vaccine is the cheapest and most effective yet, with protection up to 80 percent. Not bad for a disease that (speculatively) may have killed 50 billion humans to date.
- The University of Manchester have developed the first diagnostic test for Parkinson's.
- Period products became free in Scotland.
- Cycling is booming in the UK with weekday journeys up 47% since 2021.
- Doctors will soon be able to prescribe free bikes.
- 86 percent of British companies that took part in a 3,300 person trial of the 4-day working week say that they plan to keep the model.
- A pine marten was spotted in London for the first time in a century.
- The proportion of British people who think immigration is 'bad for the economy' halved from 42 per cent to 20 per cent. Despite all the frothy headlines over 'culture wars', social attitudes in the UK are becoming steadily more liberal.

- Thomas & Friends got its first autistic train character, Bruno the Brake Car, and Peppa Pig got its first same-sex couple.

Amid the dread of returning to the UK, it's good for me (and you too, perhaps) to remember that, at the same time as things going wrong, some things go right too.

👋 My name is David and I'm a writer, outdoor instructor and cyclist-at-large with Thighs of Steel. I write stories that help you and me understand the world (and ourselves) a little better.

This week's story is about mycelial contentment and the three (or four) species of happiness.

(ps: I caught up on all that UK news by looking through the weekly Positive News 'what went right' archive, which you can also get as a newsletter.)

Mycelial Contentment

This is part of an accidental mini series on the psychological and ecological benefits of taking new perspectives on life, society, citizenship and the planet.

The first part of the mini series looked at what I see as the organisational purpose of Thighs of Steel and took a new perspective to help me understand why I do anything at all: connection.

This second part will look more closely at happiness and take a new perspective to help assuage or at least understand the economic, ecological and existential distress that so many of us are feeling right now.

I'll be honest: I wish I could have spent another twelve years researching and writing this piece, hands buried in the soil.

Think of it as a work in progress and please be gentle!

The Three (Or Four) Species Of Happiness

All good things come in threes:

- Jesus, Joseph and Mary

- Earth, Wind And Fire
- Wet Wet Wet

Human happiness is no different: there are exactly three different species. (Except when there's four, but we can ignore that one later…)

The first species of happiness is the kind that you can only feel when you're inside the experience right now.

You might feel a sort of experiential penumbra of good vibes for a short time afterwards, but basically the happiness is gone as soon as you leave the situation.

For example, the visceral happiness you get from playing on a swing:



The happy author, c. 2005

The question at the root of this first variety of happiness is: **Am I having *fun*?**

The second species of happiness is the sort you feel even when you're no longer actually inside the experience.

This is one kind of time and space travel that humans can do: quite unbidden, a remembrance — oh, yes, I'm happy! — pops into our mind.

This sort of happiness is unlikely to stem from playing on the swings. Even this one:

(Watching that video, I think I screamed as much as they did. Worth the build up.)

This second species of happiness is more likely to crop up through a satisfying work life, successful relationships or a family of supportive friends.

The question at the heart of this second variety of happiness is: **Does this feel *right*?**

The third type of happiness goes deeper again: it's an existential happiness, reaching out far beyond our selves and our immediate circle.

It comes from the sense that we exist as one small element of a community and society, a landscape and ecosystem that is thriving in unity together.

The question is: **Are we all, people and planet, *thriving*?**

This happiness is something I have felt in the past.

I'm not alone in struggling with it right now.

The Fourth Species

The fourth species of happiness that we can safely ignore is the kind that yogis and Russell Brand talk about:

> Transcendence of all earthly happiness through direct connection with The Oneness of The Universe.

But you can forget all that for now — except one word: connection.

(Yes, I know — I'm obsessed with this idea.)

Because all three (or four) species of happiness depend on connection.

Back A Second: What Is Happiness?

Happiness is what happens when our sensory bodies come into contact with an experience and form a positive emotional bond.

When we play on the swings, that bond is easily broken by leaving the playground, and our happiness fades too.

When we form a close relationship with another human, such bonds are more complex, cropping up in more and more of our experiences and environments the longer and stronger that we share a emotional connection.

If that connection is predominantly positive: happiness ensues.

But even the strongest interpersonal relationship cannot sustain our happiness if the ecosystem around us is sick.

It is very hard to be happy when you discover that the earth is burning. Or that Liz Truss has become Prime Minister.

This is where the mushrooms might help. (Not like *that*! Although…)

The Great Entanglement

On the way back from Greece, I (finally) read Merlin Sheldrake's book Entangled Life.

Exquisite.

The subtitle is How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, And Shape Our Futures — and, yes, there is a lot of stuff in there about how fungi can forage for food, eat rocks and find the fastest route through IKEA.

But what struck me most forcefully was how, as a mycologist, the more Merlin learned about his subject, the more uncertain he became about what it means to be human.

The first living organisms on land were a collaboration between algae and fungi: lichens. The algae could photosynthesise to produce energy from the sun and the fungi could digest minerals from rock: the perfect partnership.

Likewise, plants are a collaboration between the above-ground photosynthesising organisms and the below-ground fungal mycelial networks that break down and transfer nutrients from organism to organism.

And the breaking down element is crucial: until fungi like the white rot fungus 'learned' how to digest plant matter, the earth was coated in a pile of dead plants, kilometres deep.

(This is how we got coal, by the way.)

By digesting dead vegetation, fungi guarantee the cycle of nutrients from one living organism to another. This is the thing we call soil. It wouldn't exist without fungi.

Even humans are a collaboration between 'humans' and untold millions of bacteria, fungi and viruses that help, among many other basic living functions of body and mind, to break down the plants and animals that we eat as food.

It becomes increasingly difficult to determine where human ends and the rest of ecology begins.

Life is, indeed, entangled.

8,890,000,000,000,000,000 Megabytes

Back to that question of existential happiness: right now, do you feel like we are all, people and planet, thriving?

If you're anything like me, that's going to come across as a really stupid rhetorical question.

Apart from major scientific advances like the Vegan Sausage Roll, everything's going to shit.

So what can we do about it?

Here's one thought.

(It's not a very clever or original thought, but hear me out because in a second I'm going to get you to imagine being a fungus and that'll change everything.)

As a society, perhaps we have been putting too much effort into tending our digital networks.

(Told you it wasn't very clever or original.)

I don't just mean social media, I mean the creation of the whole World Wide Web.

Statista forecast that 97 zettabytes of data will be created, captured, copied, and consumed worldwide in 2022.

That's 8,890,000,000,000,000,000 megabytes.

It's completely overwhelming to think of all the billions of hours that are put into tending our digital society every day.

By necessity, that time is being diverted away from our other projects and has perhaps contributed to the neglect of our society offline.

Finding Balance

That's not to say that I think online networks can't be extremely powerful — I doubt that social attitudes in the UK would be becoming so liberal, so quickly if it weren't for the internet.

But I think we have to be careful that our online networks really are strengthening our 'real' offline lives in the direction of greater connectivity and solidarity with the people and planet that make up our ecosystem.

I think this hybrid online-offline model is why Thighs of Steel works so well: people discover the project online, meet each other online and communicate online.

But then we come together for two months in the summer to create a living, breathing community in the 'real world'.

And it's that in-person time that changes the wider world for the better, in all the ways that I discussed a couple of weeks ago.

The difficulty is how to imagine change when our problems are so complex and our individual capacity is so limited.

One answer is to change our imaginative model of what it means to be an individual.

(Okay, here's where things get trippy!)

What if we imagined ourselves as a single exploratory growing tip of a fungus, tiny and courageous, but directly, intimately, unbreakably connected to, entangled with and backed by a mycelial network of unfathomable power and complexity?

Human As Hypha

The growing tips of a fungus are called hyphae, so imagine yourself as a single hyphae, one little growing tip of the human mycelial network that is exploring our society, the landscape, this universe.

It's easy for you to feel like an individual.

Look too closely and hyphae totally behave as individuals, merrily wiggling around through the soil, looking for yummy dead things to munch.

But zoom out and we see that, despite their apparent behaviour, hyphae are not individuals.

It's not like there's a central brain or body that tells the individual hypha what to do, but each one is plugged into a complex and responsive network.

You see: fungal hyphae can somehow sense and communicate across the network.

(I'm not even going to try and butcher the young science: I beg you, please read Merlin's book.)

If one hypha finds some delicious dead tree stump, very quickly (and mysteriously) the rest of the network will stop what they were doing and turn their attention to devouring it.

As a human hypha, you are exploring on behalf of every other actor in the network — all the other hyphae who can and will respond to every move you make, every touch and every discovery.

That gives you, the connected individual, power, agency — and responsibility.

The network decomposition of the dead tree stump is no mere act of destruction. The capturing and recycling of nutrients is a life-giving act of creation: what we call soil.

As a hypothetical human hyphae, recognise that your influence extends far beyond the human network.

You are also exploring and creating on behalf of the vegetation, the plants and the trees, that depend on the network for life support. No network, no soil.

Consequently, you're also exploring and creating for the insects and animals that depend on vegetation, and so too for those predators that depend on the life and death of their prey.

See how you are connected — not hypothetically, but literally — to everything else in the ecosystem.

Mycelial Contentment

This is how mushrooms help me fill the pit of despair that has taken the place of my third, existential, species of happiness.

Fungi give me a lens through which to see my existence as both individual and plural.

If I fall into the trap of seeing myself as an individual alone, then it's too easy to feel powerless about the existential problems we face as a species.

It's too easy to bumble along, exploring life — experiencing the first two species of happiness, perhaps — but never seeing my intimate role as part of the network that is creating this ecosystem.

And without the sense of living within a healthy ecosystem, I have no hope of experiencing the foundational existential happiness.

Fungi remind me that life is about more than my own personal *exploration*.

It's a simultaneous — and utterly entangled — act of personal exploration and collective *creation* as part of the network.

The metaphor of the human hyphae gives me license to explore *and* create, to follow my own path, but also to ensure I nurture a healthy network and, in so

doing, healthy soil and, ultimately, a healthy ecosystem.

And, perhaps, existential happiness.

So let's commit to the roles we were born to play: as entangled explorer-creators.

~

Thanks for reading — I hope some of it made sense at least. If not: get yourself a copy of Entangled Life by Merlin Sheldrake and take a look at this marvellous world from a myco-centric perspective.

Intrinsic Adventure

4 November 2022

According to numerologists, the number 333 is a message from your guardian angel, imploring you to take action on your dreams. Either that or it's a warning that a baby will soon be born. Somewhere.

If arcane numerology's not your cup of tea, then how about this: today is the forty-ninth anniversary of the first official car-free Sunday in the Netherlands.

Imagine — roads empty, bikes and rollerskates abound, drivers pulled over and fined!

Or rather, don't imagine: watch this utter joy of a video, coming to you all the way from 1973.

Critical Mass eat your heart out!

For those of you new to these pages, hello 👋 My name is David and I'm a writer, outdoor instructor and cyclist-at-large with Thighs of Steel. I write stories that help you and me understand the world (and ourselves) a little better.

Today's story is about all those green and blue circles that I've printed in every edition of this newsletter since January 2021.

Enjoy.

Friday 9 September

I'd spent a pretty sleepless night trying to discourage the local dogs from chewing up our cyclists' helmets that'd been left scattered around camp after a long day's ride.

We were all still feeling pretty tender from our brush with some kind of Montenegrin lake-bourne vomiting bug.

Considering that, only two nights previously, I'd half-slept on a trolley in A&E, I felt incredible on yesterday's ride.

Powering up the shady steep slopes of the Albanian Dajti and swooshing untrammelled down the other side, zipping through sixty kph mountain tunnels, out and over metalwork spans over thousand metre drop gorges.



I'd felt incredible, that is, until lunch.

Then things went rapidly downhill. Luckily, the last thirty kilometres of yesterday were indeed rapidly downhill.

So, although I woke up on Friday morning feeling okay, I was glad to be spending the day in Calypso, our twenty-year-old Ford Transit support vehicle*.

We waved the cyclists off, packed up camp and drove onward, over the Korab Mountains and into North Macedonia.

At the border, we discovered that we didn't have valid vehicle insurance for countries outside the EU and would not be allowed to continue until we bought a 14-day insurance pass for €50.

Love that no border guards had cared about such legal niceties in Albania.

In 2019, as one of the conditions of their accession to NATO, the Republic of Macedonia agreed to adopt the geographical qualifier 'North', appeasing Greek political concerns.

As Calypso chugged into her ninth country of the tour, I noticed that someone had peeled away the cheap sticker that had announced the country's new name, revealing the old beneath.



Together we flew over the border mountains to Lake Debar and followed the Black Drin all the way to Lake Ohrid, through pine forests and beside glittering water, marvelling at the beauty of the day's ride from the hot cabin of Calypso.

We found camp on the shores of Lake Prespa and started to cook two tonne carbohydrates, with the moon rising over the distant blue of the Baba Mountain.

But we had no phone reception on the lakeside beach and, as time ticked on, somewhere out there in the gloaming, most of our dehydrated, delicate cyclists were climbing a mountain.

I climbed back into Calypso and drove the sharp zigzags to the top of Galičica, nerves rising with each switchback and no one in sight. Did they have lights? Had they run out of water, food? Or worse?

Then, somewhere near the summit, a dozen sweat-stained cyclists drifted like ghosts from the gloom before me, spirits high.

Sucking with relief, I refilled their waters and handed out lights and fleeces for the long descent.

Then I followed them down, headlights flickering against reflective cycle tape. The stars played on the lake below.



That day was my hundredth day of adventuring in 2022.

A Big Year

I always knew this was going to be a big year: I was scheduled to spend 49 days on the road this summer with Thighs of Steel, cycling from Glasgow to Milan and then from Dubrovnik to Athens.

Days of Adventure are not necessarily biased towards these kind of exotic foreign epics: after all, I spent 35 days cycling around southern England in 2020.

But there's no question that this big year owes much to the relaxation of pandemic lockdowns and border controls, allowing me to adventure abroad.

In fact, there was so much adventuring going on that I had no time to celebrate passing my 100 day target. So that's what I'm doing today.

Yay.

(Seriously, I mean that: yay 🥳)

Although my definition of adventure is flexible enough to encompass almost anyone doing almost anything, I know that it'd hard for most people to hand over a third of their year to adventuring.

(Besides the fact most people wouldn't want to!)

100 days in a year is ambitious. 113 days (and counting) is straight-up ridiculous. When I stop for half a second to think about it, I feel very lucky.

For some reason, tracking my Days of Adventure is really working for me. This story is about why that's the case and how something similar might work for you.

It's a story that begins with a cautionary tale.

Goals Are Dangerous

My old philosophy tutor told us of a friend of his who had a long-time dream to collect a first edition of every record put out by a ridiculously niche record label.

(I think the label was some 1970s Americana psychedelic weirdness, but that's not the cautionary part of the tale.)

This was back in the days before eBay and Amazon so tracking down the records meant trawling through secondhand junk markets across the world.

There were only about twenty records to find, but the search took him decades. Every LP that he finally found only raised the rarity of the next.

By the late-nineties, we were told, he had found all but one of the records. It'd been six years since he'd added to his priceless collection, but for as long as he hadn't found that last LP, the game was still on.

Then he found it.

What a moment. What a feeling that must have been, after so many years of searching, to have finally completed the set, to have won the game.

To our tutor's enduring incredulity, his friend never bought that last record.

He picked it up in the shop, flipped it over and read the sleeve notes. Then he slipped it back onto the shelf, went up to the desk and sold the lucky shopkeeper everything he'd worked to collect over the past twenty years: the entire back catalogue of this ridiculously niche 1970s Americana psychedelic weirdness label.

That's the cautionary part of the tale: even an extremely difficult goal will, with dogged human persistence, be completed.

And then what? Emptiness.

Once he'd found the final piece, there was nothing more for our collector to do but scrap the lot, like breaking up a jigsaw puzzle.

That's the danger of goal-setting — and that *could* be the danger inherent in a project like 100 Days Of Adventure.

But there's something different with the design of that game, a difference best illustrated by another project of mine — now permanently shelved.

The Country Game

Back in the early 2000s, I had a friendly competition with pals to see who could travel to as many different countries as possible.

(Okay, it wasn't always friendly — Monaco and the Vatican really got people's backs up.)

The only rule was that the visit had to include at least one overnight stay and at least one activity of cultural interest. In other words: travelling across borders on the night train did not count.

It was a great game because I was usually winning (especially after making up a rule that added the Canary Islands and Gibraltar to the list of officially recognised countries due to something or other about non-contiguous borders and nautical miles).

And therein lies the problem with this game: the joy, for me, was in winning the game, not the experience of taking part.

Contrast this with the DOA project: I didn't even notice that I had 'won' the game. I was too wrapped up with the experience until I sat down to write today.

It wasn't that I took The Country Game particularly seriously, but the nature of the game mechanics generated serious discussions about how to reduce duplicates (each country could only count once) and how to maximise border-hopping with every trip.

To the spitting jealousy of the others, one competitor snared six countries in a single holiday to the Baltics. All within the rules.

Intrinsic Adventure

In contrast, there's no way to 'game' the DOA project without lying to myself.

I can't score if I haven't been outdoors for a significant chunk of the day doing something vaguely adventurous.

That kind of point-scoring is all about experience: it's a reward that is intrinsic to itself. It's found within, not without.

The problem with The Country Game is that its rewards were extrinsic, with no reference to the quality of experience within the game.

Quite simply, the reward of visiting a new country was to score one point.

And after that?

Visit another country, score another point.

And after that?

Visit another country, score another point.

And after that?

Visit another country, score another point.

And so on until there is no more 'And after that?', only the emptiness of the completed record collector.

Protect and Prioritise

I know I'm lucky to work the jobs I do, but over the past two years, my DOA score has been more than a mere coincidental symptom of my work and lifestyle.

Even this year, even with those 49 days (technically hard at work) with Thighs of Steel, I still wouldn't have reached 100 Days of Adventure without making an effort to clear my diary to create space.

The DOA project has made damn sure I protect time for my priorities.

It's taken me outdoors when outdoors seemed a long way distant — particularly at the short end of last year, when I was scrambling for days, a time that generated some of my most cherished memories that winter.

And *That*'s The Point

Since the first day of this year, hiking the double stone row at Hurston Ridge on Dartmoor with two friends, I've written seventeen more stories of adventure this year: a wellspring of memories filled with community, wonder and connection.

That's what the Days of Adventure have brought me since 2021, a constant reminder that 'how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives'.

There are 57 days left in the year. I plan to spend at least 13 of them outside, adventuring.

Are you putting your time where your heart is? What's stopping you from making damn sure?

BONUS CONTENT: 17 Stories of Adventure

Adventures make me think. And when I think I often write. Here are the other 17 stories that I've written while on adventure this year:

- New Year's hiking the double stone row at Hurston Ridge on Dartmoor
- 6 more days of hiking on Dartmoor in January and February
- 6 Thighs of Steel London Cycle Club rides and 4 New Forest Off Road Club ride

- 1 day hiking and 1 day mushroom picking on the Purbecks, plus another day doing conservation work on Brownsea Island
- 18 days' travelling overland to spend time with friends in Paris, Rudenoise, Chantilly, Bayonne, Madrid, Lisbon, Barcelona and the inside of a long-distance coach while trying to stifle a heavy cold during a pandemic panic
- 6 days' working as an outdoor instructor with schoolkids in the Chilterns and Surrey Hills
- 8 days' cycling from Kings Lynn to Edinburgh in April as part of a slow travel reprisal of my 2011 round Britain adventure
- 6 more days of round Britain cycling from Glasgow to Oban, via Arran, Islay and Jura in June
- 3 days on an ecotherapy course in Somerset in June and July
- 35 days' cycling from Glasgow to Milan with Thighs of Steel in July and August (stories: Philoxenia & The Magic Cobbler, Carpocratian Touring)
- 4 days' exploring porticoes in Bologna, Italy and abandoned hotels in Kupari, Croatia
- 14 days' cycling from Dubrovnik to Athens, via Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia in September (stories: Not A Charity Auction, Lies and the What What Now Now), plus another couple of days' cycling with friends in Greece

Postscript...

*It was Calypso's fifth time supporting the ride all the way to Athens and back. She's beginning to creak, so we're looking for an upgrade for 2023.

Do you know anyone who might have a long wheelbase high top van they want to sell or give away to a small cycling community with a big heart?

I Put These Buttons Here Every Week :)

The stories I write are totally free to read and always have been.

It's almost unbelievable, then, that there's a growing band of humans who reckon that my regular blend of 'curiosity, insight, fine writing and infectious sense of adventure' is worth £30 a year.

Heartfelt thanks to Andy, Claire, Tudor, John, Harri, Becky, Illia, Joanna, Maryla, Cass, Georgie, James, Joe, Libby, David, Tessa and JMJ.

If you'd like to join them and chip in with an annual or monthly contribution, hit this button:

I'm also motivated to an unhealthy degree by in-group approval. Every time you share a story that you've enjoyed, I get a load of new subscribers and that makes me feel very funny deep down inside:

Any comments or questions to hurl my way? You can reply to this email like any other and turn this extended rant into a proper conversation.

Thank you 🙏

#1 Make Life Wonderful

This week I finished reading Nonviolent Communication by Marshall B. Rosenberg, in preparation for the introductory course that I'm taking in December.

I was pretty much knocked over by this simple sentence:

> [W]hen the sole energy that motivates us is simply to make life wonderful for others and ourselves, then even hard work has an element of play in it.

Actually, not even the whole sentence. Just those three words: Make Life Wonderful. There's a tattoo in there, or maybe a newsletter title… Watch this space.

#2 Why Is The [News] Media So Negative?

Freakonomics Radio produced this excellent podcast exploring why journalism is, on the whole, pretty depressing.

One of the interesting discoveries for me was that, although negativity and conflict has a nasty habit of grabbing our attention, positive stories have been found to be more likely to go viral, more likely to be shared.

According to the linked study by Jonah Berger and Katherine Milkman, positivity was as important a factor as being featured prominently in the New York Times or being written by a famous author.

We *want* the good stuff.

Compare that finding with the research in this Forbes article, which indicates that, while we live in a more positive world, our news media (perhaps fuelled by eyeball scarcity since the rise of the internet) is inflecting more and more of their stories with negativity.

Don't let them win.

#3 Slow Ways Swarm 5-13 November

Walk, run or wheel and then review your nearby Slow Ways route(s), helping to build a network of practical car-free pathways between the place you live and the places you go.

Slow Ways is an awesome citizen project that I *still* haven't got involved in — tomorrow is the day!

That's it for this week — thank you for reading.

Tomorrow night I'm going to see Bob Dylan playing, incongruously, the Bournemouth International Centre. If his recent setlists are anything to go by, I can expect 30 percent perfection.

After that, I'm off to Wales for a few days of rambling and foraging in the Brecon Beacons. Until then…

Big love,
dc:

Make Space For Others To Shine

3 February 2023

And a warm welcome from a squatted perch overlooking the ocean.

Following on from last week's appeal for healthy habitual alternatives to any form of knee-based self-care, I have started using a squatting desk.

Inspired by a 2017 article by physical therapist Carrie Williamson, this is an almost certainly marketable term for 'swapping my chair for an upturned kettlebell'.

Since December 2019, I have recorded 772 at-home yoga sessions, at an average of 16 minutes per day (currently more like 8 minutes).

I've been amazed at what a difference this investment of 1 percent of my waking time has made to my flexibility.

The fact that I can get into the Asian squat position is a minor miracle considering that, three years ago, I couldn't sit cross-legged on the floor.

But there is a gross story about *why* I started stretching on the daily — you want to hear it?

Thought so.

In summer 2019, I cycled with Thighs of Steel from Paris to Bordeaux and then from Ljubljana to Athens.

Every night for four weeks, we'd wild camp — along with everything that entails.

Sleeping under a scrap of canvas, washing in rivers or lakes, eating high-carb meals under the stars as the sun set and dawn rose.

And, of course, pooing into a freshly dug hole in the ground.

This isn't where the story gets gross.

At first, the pooing was fine.

My flexibility wasn't up to much, so I wasn't able to position myself over my poo hole very comfortably, but that didn't seem to matter so long as I dug the pit near a tree against which I could balance myself.

But then all that high-carb food caught up with me and I got a touch of constipation.

Constipation is uncomfortable enough, but, with a relaxing toilet seat unavailable and physically unable to squat, I found myself straining harder than I usually might.

And *this* is where the story gets gross.

One morning, after porridge at a beautiful riverside camp spot in Croatia, I strained so hard that I slightly tore my anus.

Ouch.

The discomfort stayed with me for the rest of the ride — and I can tell you that one thing you really don't want while cycling for ten hours a day is even a *slightly* torn anus.

When I got home to the UK, I vowed that I would do something about my inability to defecate comfortably without a throne.

So began my daily yoga sessions — and now look at me. Not only can I take wildly adventurous poos, but I can even write gross stories to you while crouching in a kettlebell-supported squat.

Start from where you are, and start today.

For those of you new to these pages, hello 👋 My name is David and I'm a writer, outdoor instructor and cyclist-at-large with Thighs of Steel. I write stories that help you and me understand the world (and ourselves) a little better.

I sometimes write about poo.

Make Space For Others To Shine

Summer feels like a loooong time ago, eh?

It's dark outside and the windows are misted up with rain. Our tans have faded and even our steely thighs have turned to jelly.

As all but the freshest or most cursory reader will know, I'm one of the infamous community of cyclists that make up Thighs of Steel and every year I help

organise what is almost certainly Europe's longest charity bike ride.

Last summer, our 93 cyclists not only rode 5,428km from Glasgow to Athens, but also raised a record-breaking (for us) £114,632 in solidarity with grassroots refugee projects through charity MASS Action.

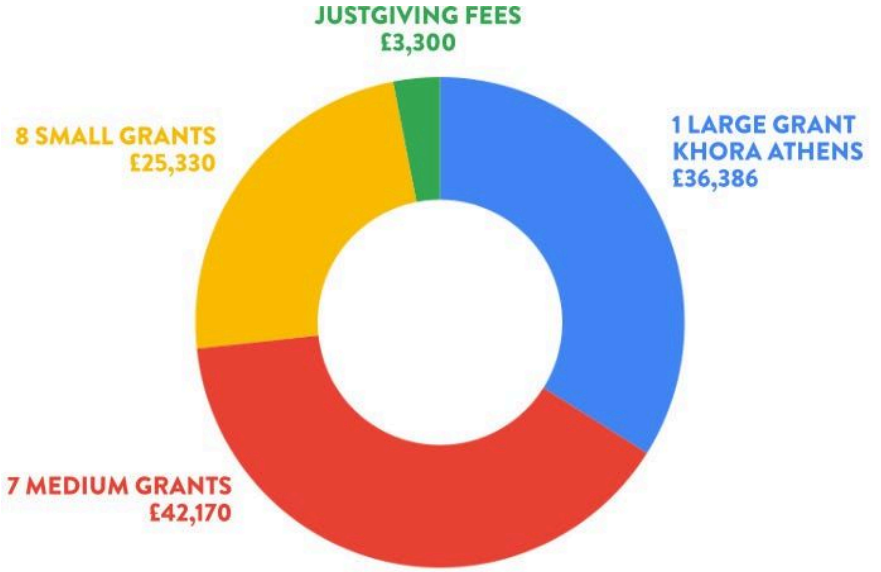
I know that many TDCN readers contributed to the pot, so thank you: £114,632, including £12k in Gift Aid, is such a significant amount of money.

It means that MASS Action have been able to give a big YES to no fewer than sixteen solidarity projects, covering pretty much every aspect of the movement for migrant social justice:

- **Community centres** offer everything from nourishing meals and legal support to bus tickets and hot showers in Thessaloniki (Wave Thessaloniki), Samos (Just Action) and Athens (Khora)
- Several projects provide **accommodation** or work to **improve living conditions** in Sheffield (ASSIST Sheffield), Glasgow (Scottish Asylum Seekers Resident Association) and Athens (Chamomile and Mazi x FORGE For Humanity)
- The Babylon Project offers **drama, storytelling, film-making and dance** in the UK, while Musikarama connects people through **music** in Athens
- Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group supports people during and after **immigration detention**
- Hakoura Organic is an **ecological cooperative farm** established by refugees in the countryside northwest of Athens
- No Evictions Network, No Borders Network and Calais Migrant Solidarity take **direct action** to support the **rights, safety and dignity** of people on the move in the UK and France
- In Scotland, LGBT UNITY is a **peer support** group made up of **LGBTQIA+** refugees and asylum seekers in Glasgow and Bike For Refugees runs **cycling community hubs** in Glasgow and Edinburgh

Phew! Hard to believe what a couple of months' cycling can achieve.

It's so significant that we couldn't even display every project on one pie chart, so please hurry along to The Reason and read more about what all that money is doing out in the world.



And — YES — this isn't even the whole pie. There's still £7,445.23 for MASS Action to distribute after this summer's ride, wherever the need is greatest.

Sorry, did somebody say 'this summer's ride'?

Hell yeah.

Once again, we'll be facilitating the highlight of your summer, starting in Glasgow on 14 July and finishing a continent later in Athens on 17 September.

We open for signups on **Friday 17 February at 6pm** — but ONLY if you're on our special secret early access email list.

The most popular weeks sell out minutes after going live, so get on it!

Humanity is a team game. We don't have to do it all — we can't — but we can choose to play our part.

I'm lucky that my part, right now, is to help put on a bike ride that makes space for others to shine — not only the ninety-odd cyclists who surprise themselves with their own strength, but also the people and projects making change happen on the ground.

Everything we do in life either brings us one step closer together or pushes us further apart.

Go Team Human.

Making Refugees Welcome: A World Record Breaking GPS Story On Bikes

5pm Sunday

In 2021, 63 thighs cyclists rode 2,208km across southern England on a route that spelled out REFUGEES WELCOME. It was the world's biggest GPS bike artwork and raised £81,428 for refugee solidarity projects.

But what did Radio New Zealand, celebrity chef Gordon Ramsey, and infamous immigrant-baiting redtop The Sun make of it all?

Register here to join me and Georgie on Zoom



Set your Zooms for thighs o'clock and see ya there! 💚

Dismantling The Patriarchy One Group Ride At A Time

> Until there's a group ride happening every night of the week, there's work to be done.

The New Forest Off Road Club show us how.

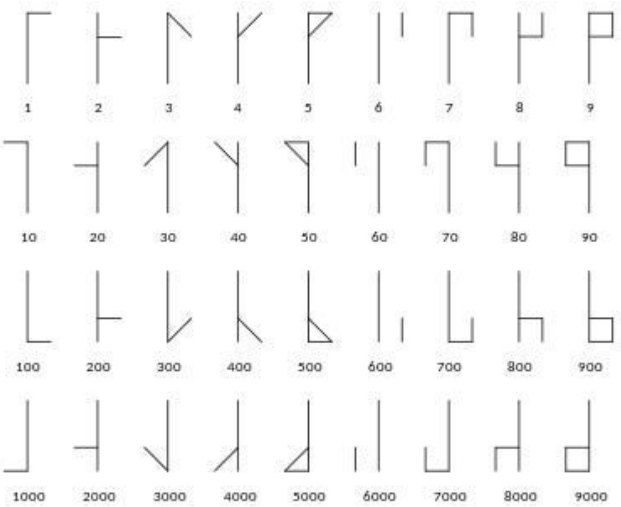
Cistercian Numerals



Happy 2023! Translate your own on dcode.fr

800 years ago, a Leicester-based monk from an influential order of Catholic reformists introduced a numerical system that could encode every number from

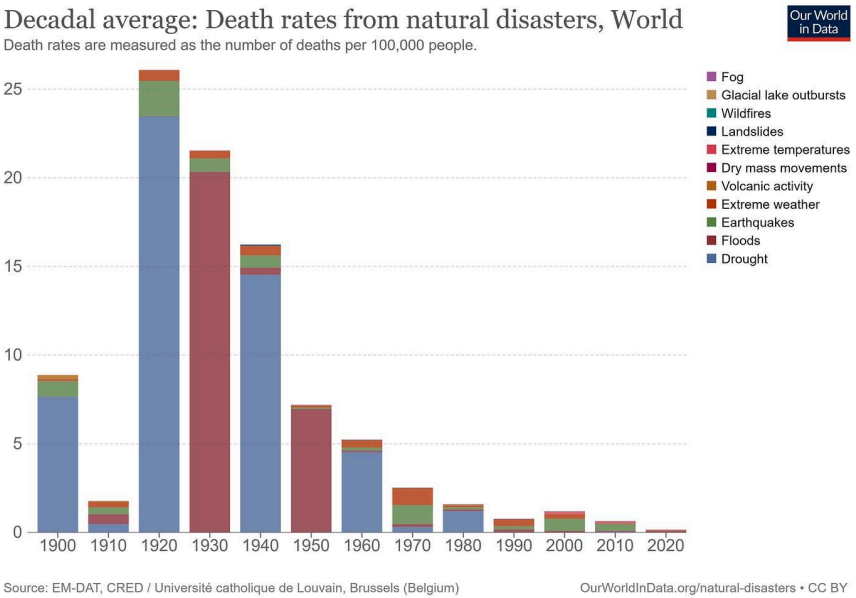
1 to 9999 as a single glyph:



Not especially useful, but you can't deny it's clever.

The Safest Decade In The World... EVER!

This mind-scrambling graph was shared in the latest Future Crunch newsletter:



If you're ever feeling like things aren't going your way in the news media, turn to the Future Crunch archives.

I highly recommend searching the annual archives for your home country or a topic you particularly need to hear good news on.

Searching for the UK in 2022 turns up 25 matches, including:

> £15 billion of new offshore wind farms announced at record-low power prices
>
> Five major nature recovery projects are underway to restore a whooping 99,000 hectares of land across the West Midlands, Cambridgeshire, the Peak District, Norfolk, and Somerset
>
> The UK has pardoned all gay and bisexual men convicted under a law that criminalised same-sex relations until the 1980s

Or browsing last year's archives for 'vaccine' pulls up 30 matches, among which:

> Ebola has been defeated thanks to vaccines and effective clinical treatments
>
> Over one million children in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi have now received one or more doses of the world's first malaria vaccine
>
> Thanks to measles vaccines, an astonishing 56 million lives have been saved since 2000

I mean. Talk about impact.

That's all for this week. Thanks for reading and I hope you found something to take away with you.

This newsletter is supported directly by readers like you. Join 'em with a £30 or £5 contribution. Cheers!

Big love,
dc:

Remember That Time We Cycled 2,200km Across Britain On A Route That Spelled Out Refugees Welcome? Oh Yeah!

10 February 2023

Leonard Cohen, Janis Joplin & Me

10 March 2023

And welcome from the other side of International Women's Day.

As you might know, I'm part of a badass community of humans called Thighs of Steel.

What you might not know is that Thighs of Steel, Europe's longest annual bike ride bar none, was started by women and that our core team and cyclists have always been majority women.

Thighs of Steel wasn't intentionally set up like this, it just happened that way when a crew of strong, connected, hilarious women got a bunch of friends together to ride 5,000km in solidarity with refugees, migrants and people on the move.



7 years on from that first ride, we're still not your average cycling crew:

🚴‍♀️ Our 2023 cyclists are 69% women
👩‍🎨 Our core team is 60% women
🗺️ We also happen to organise Europe's longest annual bike ride

The result is a community where women, men, all humans alike can drop competition, dominance and braggadocio and instead fully embrace the connection, vulnerability and warmth of an epic bike ride with friends.

There are still a few places on this year's Athens ride: we'd love you to join us.

For those of you new to these pages, hello 👋 My name is David and I'm a writer, outdoor instructor and cyclist-at-large with Thighs of Steel. I write stories that help you and me understand the world (and ourselves) a little better.

Sometimes, like this week, I write about songs.

I Remember You Well

This is a story about two songs, both written by men about women they met in New York, inside and outside the Chelsea Hotel.

(Before you switch off, I've also included one of the women's side of the story. It's hilarious.)

The Chelsea is famous for its residents and the work they created there: Dylan Thomas, Jack Kerouac, Edith Piaf, Jane Fonda, Allen Ginsburg, Patti Smith, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Jimi Hendrix — and, of course, Leonard Cohen and Janis Joplin.

Leonard Cohen Meets Janis Joplin

In the late night spring of 1968, Leonard Cohen and Janis Joplin met in the Chelsea Hotel lift, going up to the fourth floor.

Cohen gathered his courage and asked if she was looking for someone:

> She said 'Yes, I'm looking for Kris Kristofferson.'
>
> I said, 'Little lady, you're in luck, I am Kris Kristofferson.' Even though she knew that I was someone shorter than Kris Kristofferson, she never let on.

By the time the lift reached the fourth floor, the love affair was on, a tribute to courage — if only for a couple of hours.

The next day, Joplin tracked down that handsome devil Kris Kristofferson, who sweetly sang to her the song that would become her biggest hit.

It took a couple of years for Janis Joplin to record her bootshaking version of Kristofferson's Me And Bobby McGee (Spotify | YouTube), on 1 October 1970.

Three days later, she was dead.

Shortly after, Leonard Cohen started writing a new song, which he eventually released in 1974 as Chelsea Hotel #2 (Spotify | Youtube).

Here's how it opens:

> I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel,
> you were talking so brave and so sweet,
> giving me head on the unmade bed,
> while the limousines wait in the street.

Now, to be fair to Leonard Cohen, the story he tells is more complex than these first lines would suggest, but it's not Cohen's song that I want to write about.

Jeffrey Lewis Meets A Woman In Glasses

In 2001, New York antifolk songwriter Jeffrey Lewis released his first single, an extended riff on Leonard Cohen's song, which he called The Chelsea Hotel Oral Sex Song (Spotify | Youtube).

Before you get too excited, this is not a song about oral sex. As Jeff Lewis explains:

> Life doesn't work out the way it does in old songs
> That's why we sing new ones to say what really goes on

So what really went on?

Well, if Jeff Lewis will allow me to summarise his seven minute masterpiece:

1. Late one night, 'tired and alone', Jeff is walking past the Chelsea Hotel
2. He overhears a conversation about Leonard Cohen between a woman in glasses and her two, possibly gay, friends
3. Jeff gets 'uncharacteristically courageous' and interrupts the strangers
4. Jeff and the woman in glasses chat for 'a minute or two' about Leonard Cohen's song, Chelsea Hotel #2
5. The three strangers stop to look in through a pub window
6. Jeff says good night (though he hadn't quite meant to)
7. The woman in glasses mysteriously says, 'see you later'

That's it. That's the entirety of the narrative action: they never saw each other again; they didn't even swap names.

The song is *three times* as long as the encounter it describes.

What About The Oral Sex?

In that two minute conversation, the woman in glasses told Jeff Lewis that Leonard Cohen's line about getting a blowjob 'made her want to do naughty things' and Jeff heard the 'faint knocking of opportunity':

> Right about then I should have asked if she knew
> What the Chelsea charged if we got a room for two

But he didn't. He got shy, waved goodbye, went home and wrote this song instead.

Don't get me wrong, I'm glad he did write this song — for two reasons, actually.

The first reason is, quite simply, this, the greatest rhyming couplet known to science:

> If I was Leonard Cohen or some other song writing master
> I'd know to first get the oral sex and then write the song after

The second reason I'm glad he wrote this song is because the narrative action of Jeff Lewis's street encounter ends only five minutes into the song: what happens in the last two minutes transcends the self-deprecating story into a moment of connective awe for us all.

'For The Love Of Other Folks That They Barely Knew'

In those last two minutes, Jeff Lewis turns his gaze onto the audience, as if to say, 'Hold on, nothing happened with this woman outside the Chelsea and yet this song did happen, is happening, and, what's more, you're all still listening — what does *that* mean?'

In Jeff's words, it means something wonderful:

> That all around the world there may be folks singing tunes
> For the love of other folks that they barely knew

This bit of the song usually gets a laugh because it's so ridiculous. No one writes songs like that.

Except they do. The woman in glasses would laugh at this bit too — the laughter of giddy recognition.

And we can enjoy that same note of giddy recognition for ourselves right now, even without a gawky folksinger writing a love song for us.

Remember You Remember Me Well Too

Think of all the people you've ever interacted with. Go on: all of them.

Okay, okay — too much. How about just the ones who made you 'sing'?

If you're like me (and Jeff), they'll fall into two camps:

1. There'll be people still in your life who already know that you remember them well. Your best friend who taught you self-esteem as a teenager or the mentor who modelled how to change career late in life.
2. But there'll also be people in your past who will *never* know that you remember them well. The Albanian plumber-mechanic who showed you the true meaning of hospitality, or that lost classmate in college who didn't realise he was teaching you how to be funny.

Firstly: make a note to go and tell everyone in Camp 1 exactly what they mean to you. You can never do this too many times.

Now turn your attention to the people in Camp 2. This is where the magic happens.

Look at your list and ponder: there must be hundreds of fleeting moments in your life where a complete stranger made you sing and you will never be able to let them know.

Take a moment to acknowledge the ripples in the water, stones skipped by strangers.

Now flip it around in Jeff's next lines:

> […] the next time you're feeling kinda lonesome and blue
> Just think that someone somewhere might be singing about you

A laugh again: fantastically unlikely. But it isn't.

If you remember a hundreds strangers well, remember that a hundred more strangers remember you well too — they just never got the chance to tell you.

When you realise how even a brief interaction can connect and change us, that's pure wonder. Never forget it.

The Other Side

Okay — reality check!

Songwriters like Leonard Cohen and Jeffrey Lewis are really good at turning their lives into stories: pinning the emotion that helps them process the encounter.

It's a beautiful defence mechanism — transmuting their personal vulnerability into universal meaning.

As Jeff Lewis says, it's much easier to write a song than it is to risk rejection.

You might think that vulnerability to rejection doesn't apply to Leonard Cohen, but I'm not so sure.

We'll probably never know what story Jeff Lewis's woman in glasses would tell of their encounter, but Janis Joplin wasn't one to stay in the shade.

This is what she made of that same one night stand with Leonard Cohen:

> Sometimes you're with someone and you're convinced that they have something to tell you. So maybe nothing's happening, but you keep telling yourself something's happening — innate communication. […]
>
> So you keep being there, pulling, giving, rapping. And then, all of a sudden about four o'clock in the morning you realise that, flat ass, this motherfucker's just lying there. He's not balling me.

🤣

Be Both

Leonard Cohen and Jeffrey Lewis would seem to offer two different approaches to a fleeting connection between strangers:

- either we are courageous enough to stop and feel out the depths of the exchange
- or we are sensitive enough to walk away and still find meaning in the moment

But it's not a choice: we can be both.

As Jeff says:

> Life doesn't work out the way it does in old songs
> That's why we sing new ones to say what really goes on

So let's sing a new song: a song where we enjoy both Leonard Cohen's earthy physicality and Jeffrey Lewis's abstract transcendence.

Let's recognise that any connection with a stranger, in the lift, on the street, can go both ways.

We might flex our courage and take things further, but, when we don't — and most often we won't because we'd never get anything else done — let's remain sensitive that the moment was meaningful.

And occasionally, occasionally, a connection that we didn't explore, years before, can, in the most unlikeliest of plot twists, come back around a second time.

Then we are both.

I'll leave the last word to Jeff Lewis:

> So who knows if I'll ever see her again? Maybe we'll see
> This whole time she could have been singing about me
> Probably not — but it could be

~

ps: Just as I was finishing the final read-through on this piece, a woman snuck up behind me on the train and said in a loud voice, 'Ahh, I LOVE that song.'

I turned around with a thump and realised she was talking on the phone, to someone else. But I hope that one day, by some serpentine logic of the universe, she gets to read this story, listen to the music, and say again, 'Ahh, I LOVE that song.'

Thanks to Leonard Cohen, Janis Joplin, Jeffrey Lewis and CW for showing me how it's done.

Muddle #1

If you haven't yet read EM Forster's A Room With A View, please do. If only for his characterisation of that exceedingly English psychological trap — the muddle:

> You are inclined to get muddled [...] Let yourself go. Pull out from the depths those thoughts that you do not understand, and spread them out in the sunlight and know the meaning of them.
>
> [...]
>
> There's nothing worse than a muddle in all the world. It is easy to face Death and Fate [...] It is on my muddles that I look back with horror.
>
> [...]
>
> We can help one another but little. I used to think I could teach young people the whole of life, but I know better now, and all my teaching of George has come down to this: beware of muddle.

Beware of muddle, people. Don't stay confused or uncertain: connect and communicate.

Muddle #2

In this delightful piece, Robin Sloan shows how JRR Tolkein wrote The Lord Of the Rings in exactly the same way that any of us mortal writers write: by

muddling through.

> Tolkien, for all his vaunted designs, only got to The Good Stuff when he was IN it, really working the text of the novels [...] He could not worldbuild his way into a workable story; he had to muddle and discover and revise, just like the rest of us.

The One Ring To Rule Them All was originally conceived as just one of thousands manufactured by The Dark Lord, like 'cursed candies scattered [...] across Middle-earth'.

In early drafts, Aragorn, son of Arathorn, was replaced by a ranger hobbit with wooden feet named Trotter. Good grief.

> The analogy is clear, and hugely heartening: if Tolkien can find his way to the One Ring in the middle of the fifth draft, so can I, and so can you.

When you come across a muddle — and you will — persist with it until it clears up. Muddle on *through*.

Muddle #3



Photo of a cocktail muddler by Andrey Trush

That's all for this week. I feel very lucky that I get to sit here and write to all 536 of you, picking up these words from 50 countries around the world.

Thank you for reading and I hope you found something to take away with you.

Don't forget that this newsletter is community supported. It's easy for you to pay what you feel it's worth:

There's also a tier where you can pay £50 or more. Whatever you choose, thank you.

Big love,
dc:

Enter The Packing Room

7 July 2023

And a warm welcome from after eight.



Not these

It's not often that I get to write to you from so late an hour — I'm seeing it as a creative constraint.

Ooh, remember them?

Composer Igor Stravinsky once wrote:

> My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles.
>
> The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit.

So here we are.

I wonder: what constraints do you have on your life and work, and do you — can you — think of them as creative constraints?

Answers on a postcard. Or email. Or even in the comments (did you even know they existed?)

Sometimes I don't have much time to write a newsletter.

The Packing Room

The reason I'm not writing to you until now is that I've spent the day hammering through the zillions of pettifogging tasks that cram the hours before a lengthy departure from home.

Tasks like these:

Name: Today Range: A1:G7410

	A	B	C	D	E
1	To dos	Genre	Pts	Today?	Date Done
5	Print accommodation docs		3	T	07/07/2023
6	Print cyclist info and core team!		3	T	07/07/2023
7	Thighs Thursday		3	T	07/07/2023
8	Handlebars and indexing on bike		3	T	07/07/2023
9	Post bike frame		3	T	07/07/2023
10	Camping night 3.1 come through? Cancel other one if so!		2	T	07/07/2023
11	Pay additional ferry £35 and send them the mainfest!		2	T	07/07/2023
12	DC newsletters to DC.info		2	T	07/07/2023
13	Run / swim!		2	T	07/07/2023
14	Pay for W3 camping		2	T	07/07/2023

Kudos to DRL's Points Productivity Planner for keeping me on track. This is working document, so keep your spelling spots to yourself. Mainfest indeed.

As you may or may not have gathered, on Monday I leave for Glasgow, for four days' final preparation before meeting the first cohort of ~~sadists~~ cyclists taking on the first week of our two-month, 5,400km bike ride to Athens.

I should be back home sometime in September or October.

It's not a vanishingly long time, but it is certainly something of a disappearance.

And so this morning began with me randomly chucking things into what I like to think of as my ‘packing room’.

I think every adventurer needs a packing room: a place to dump the first practical stirrings of an adventure before it either (a) fizzles out and is forgotten or (b) slams you in the oh-fuck face of last minute dread.

(I also think that every human being is an adventurer in a choose-their-own domain.)

Here’s what my packing room currently looks like:



And I thought it could be a nice idea to take you through five items that wouldn’t make it onto most touring cyclists’ packing lists (let alone into their blessed packing room).

1. A Flag



This flag was hand-stitched many years ago — 2018, I think — for the third edition of Thighs of Steel, which rode from London to Athens, through Slovenia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.

Ljubljana to Sofia — 1,400km riding, 14,000m climbing and 78 hours of saddle bum — was my first thighs ride and I was mightily proud that they entrusted me with the carrying of the flag.

I still am.



That's me on the left after two weeks of cycling Ljubljana to Sofia, 2018

2. Seven Debit Cards & 500 Albanian Leke



This photo represents the stomach-popping logistical and administrative rough and tumble that we all go through, both before and during the ride, to grease the wheels of summer so that they spin as smoothly as could reasonably be demanded.

I mean: have you ever tried to acquire seven debit cards that are free to use in Europe for a non-profit that isn't a charity and doesn't have money to burn?

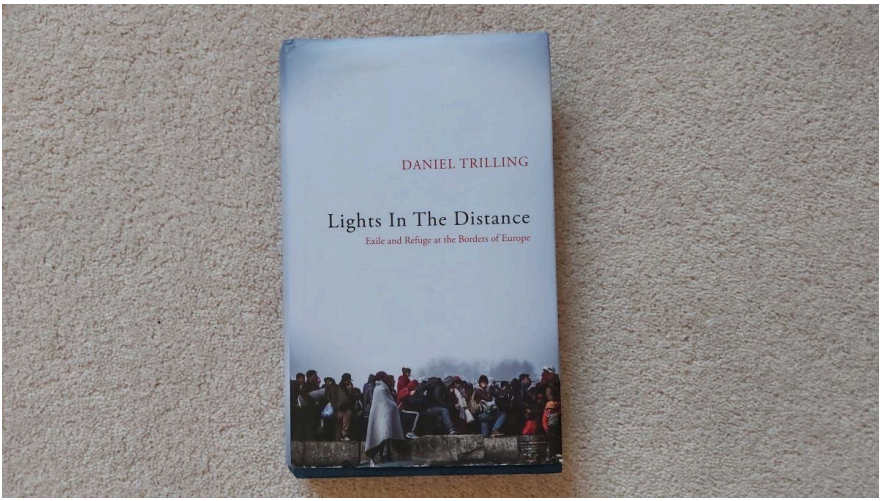
Thank goodness for Equals Money.

This entry could just as easily have been a photo of our Public Liability certificate, representing the last two months of nerve-clenching horror as 'a costly claim in the events industry' totally ham-slapped our 'risk profile'.

The good news is that I'm spending my final Friday evening at home writing these words to you, so we must be more or less ready to ride.

SHUDDUP DON'T JINX IT, DAVE!

3. A Very Specific Book



I wrote about this excellent book a few weeks ago, so I won't say any more.

The purpose of Thighs of Steel is to raise funds in solidarity with refugees, migrants, asylum seekers and people on the move across Europe.

We help grassroots organisations keep doing everything they do.

We share a dream of a borderless world once again, with free movement for all.

You can add your heft to the hew by donating here. Thank you.

4. Defence For The Defenceless



It's summer and we're cycling through Scotland.

After my experiences a month ago in Northumberland, it's time to up my anti-midge game.

Smidge is a classic, but now I've added a citronella candle and a frankly awesome midge head net to my battlements — both bought from Totally Herbie of Scotland.

Their website might be from the nineties, but they mean business. And so now do I.



5. Dougal The Bugle



I bought Dougal from a Hastings junk shop on the first leg of my second ride around Britain back in 2020 so that I could have a part to play (literally) in the mock-funeral of a friend of a friend.

(It was something he'd always wanted to do: my friend played his spirit guide, a badger.)

Tragically, I recently found out that this friend of a friend has now passed away for real, which adds an appropriate sense of gravitas to the sounding of my most unusual touring accessory.

Some love it, some hate it (especially when it wakes them up at 5am for another expletive-sodden ride up a mountain), and none can ignore it.

Mercifully, every once in a while, someone comes on the ride who can actually play the blasted thing.

At those moments, atop a ravaging hill climb in Wales or at a sundown lakeside in the Italian Alps, Dougal the Bugle will sing a sweet tune that I like to imagine wefts its way into outer space, into the resonating space between atoms where the stardust lives.

This one's for you, Jimi.

Not A Miracle

19 August 2023

And a warm welcome from the walled city of Lucca, a sacred grove of luminous space in Tuscany, Italy.

Eight hundred years ago, a beloved domestic servant of Lucca was buried.

Three centuries later, her body (definitely not her body) was exhumed, discovered miraculously undecomposed, and put on display for veneration.

A hundred years more and the dead woman was canonised by the Catholic Church as Saint Zita, patron of maids and lost keys.

Today, for three Euros, you can visit her 'incorrupted' shrivelled body in its glass case on top of an altar in the Basilica di San Frediano.

If that's your sort of thing.

But I didn't come to Lucca to ogle cadavers; I came here to lie in the shade, eat pizza by weight, and find perspective on the last five weeks.



Perspective: Lucca, Tuscany

Since I last wrote — a glance at the stranger side of my cycle-tour packing list — the forty-four cyclists of the first four weeks of Thighs of Steel have successfully ridden all 2,384km of road between Glasgow and Milan.

That's a heck of a long way.

The vast distances, the never-ending hills, the sleepless nights and the heavy summer rain stretched many cyclists well past what they once thought their physical and mental limits.



Summer cycling in Versailles, Île de France

More significantly, we have now collectively raised over £70,000 for grassroots refugee and migrant solidarity projects.

Last year, the whole ride raised £114,632. It was a record total for one of our summer mega group rides and I genuinely thought it couldn't be beat.

This year, with four weeks more to ride before Athens, we are £1,000 ahead of where we were this time last year.

The ride is not a race and our fundraising is not a competition, but I have been gratifyingly dumbstruck, once again, by the generosity and support shown by thousands of ordinary citizens for a cause unpopular with both politicians and the press.

Thank you to everyone who has already donated. Your money is already being used to keep the doors open at the Khora Collective in Athens.

Khora is an association that runs a community centre across three buildings in Kypseli and Exarcheia, and provides services to anyone that needs them.

> We value solidarity, autonomy, community, and the right of everyone to access the basic means to live in our city.

Khora includes a social kitchen, asylum support centre, a free shop for clothes and toiletries and a maker space with a focus on arts and crafts as therapeutic practice for women and LGBTQIA+ migrants and asylum seekers.

In the days before Thighs of Steel left Glasgow, we heard that one of Khora's major funders had run into financial difficulties and been forced at short notice to withdraw their €60,000 grant.

Khora costs €8,000 per month to run. They had enough in the bank to stay open until August. Then: nothing.

Luckily, at this point, MASS Action, the charity for whom Thighs of Steel fundraise, were able to step in and grant out €32,000 from this year's ride donations.

That's enough to keep Khora running until the end of the year.

I say 'luckily'; it's not luck.

It's what happens when a load of people get together to do something they believe in, and when they stay focused on the purpose of why they do that something.

I'm talking about the cyclists, Thighs of Steel organisers, MASS Action volunteers, and of course the thousands of people who donate.



Cormet de Roselend: a warm-up of a climb to 1,968m in the French Alps

Saint Zita, a humble house maid, was known in life for doing ordinary things extraordinarily well — such a rare quality that she's been credited with a hundred and fifty miracles.

This summer, Thighs of Steel cyclists are doing ordinary things.

We're all just spinning wheels, sharing stories and inviting our friends to donate in solidarity with people on the move across Europe.

Nothing of what we do is a miracle, but that doesn't mean that I don't think we do our ordinary things extraordinarily well.

If you would like to donate and join the 2,225 people already supporting this cause, then please do.

If you're a UK taxpayer, then you can also choose to add Gift Aid and the government will automagically slap an extra 25 percent to your donation. That's money they can't spend on building prison boats.

Sometimes I'm so busy supporting Europe's longest charity bike ride that I don't have any fraction of time to write you an email — and even when I do, it finishes almost before it has begun.

And so, with sincere apologies for my five-week absence, you are very welcome, finally, to edition 369.

Until next time, big love,
dc:



Finishing Week 4 at the Duomo Cathedral in Milan, Italy

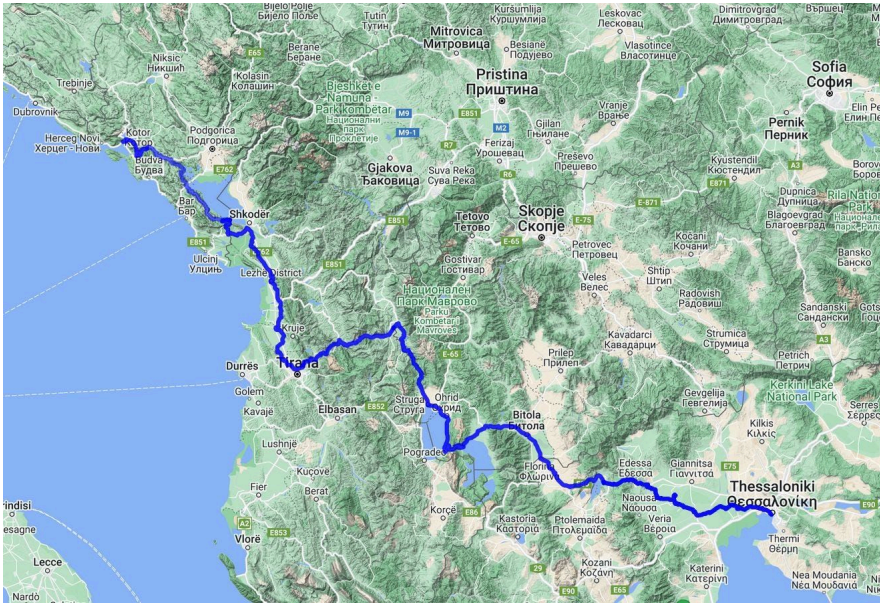
A Midpoint

10 September 2023

And a warm welcome from Thessaloniki, named contemporaneously for the sister of Alexander the Great of Macedon, an etymology that hints at the long human history for culture and conflict at this crossroads of the world.

But (in the words of The Tim Traveller) we're not here to discuss any of *that*.

Or maybe we are, but not until after showing you a map that does absolutely nothing to hint at how hard and beautiful the last week has been: cycling 738km across (what felt like) a dozen mountain ranges through Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia and Greece.



738km and 8,672m of climbing from Kotor to Thessaloniki in six and a half days

Sometimes I cycle a stupidly long way in a stupidly short period of time.

There will be some of you who will now be expecting a 6,000 word story about cycling hundreds of miles clean across the Balkan Peninsula, from the Adriatic

to the Ionian.

Sadly, I shall have to disappoint you, for tomorrow at dawn I don once more my padded shorts and prescription sunnies and take to the saddle.

For tomorrow we ride to Athens.

This is but a snatched midpoint.



For some ridiculous reason, after four weeks of crewing Thighs of Steel from Glasgow to Milan, I decided to cycle the whole of the last two weeks: a lucky thirteen days riding from Dubrovnik to Athens, via Thessaloniki.

No wonder the ride began with some pretty heavy anxiety.

The night before we left Dubrovnik I found myself eyes wide open until past three in the morning. Breakfast was at five.

I couldn't. I shouldn't. It wouldn't have been safe so sleep deprived on those hectic roads out of the city.

So I cancelled my alarm and caught a few hours' kip.

I spent the morning in the support van, back as an auxiliary core team member, helping fetch and carry crates as we packed up the weekend.

Fast driving, slow borders, and finally I joined the ride further down the road in Kotor.

I spent the rest of the day sweeping and scratching up the infamous Kotor Serpentine — twenty-five or more switchbacks offering views grander and ever-grander, south, north, south, north, for a thousand metres of elevation and a place in the heavens with a sunset never beat.



The point of this whole ride is to raise funds for refugee solidarity projects across Europe.

You can donate with love and gratitude here.

You'd be joining 2,726 other supporters who, collectively, have donated £86,257 so far this ride.

Thank you.

And that's where I'll leave this update. I'm sorry I couldn't be more profound.

Big love,
dc:

Together Through The Flood

24 September 2023

And a warm welcome from the back of a 2005 Ford Transit called Beryl, doing 110kph into the Aosta Valley, an hour shy of Chamonix and our beds for the night (👋RK🙏).

Sometimes I spend too long in the back of a Ford Transit.



Beryl

I left home on 10 July, eleven weeks ago, to ride Thighs of Steel 2023.

This was the sixth time we've cycled to Athens and the second year we got there all the way from Glasgow.

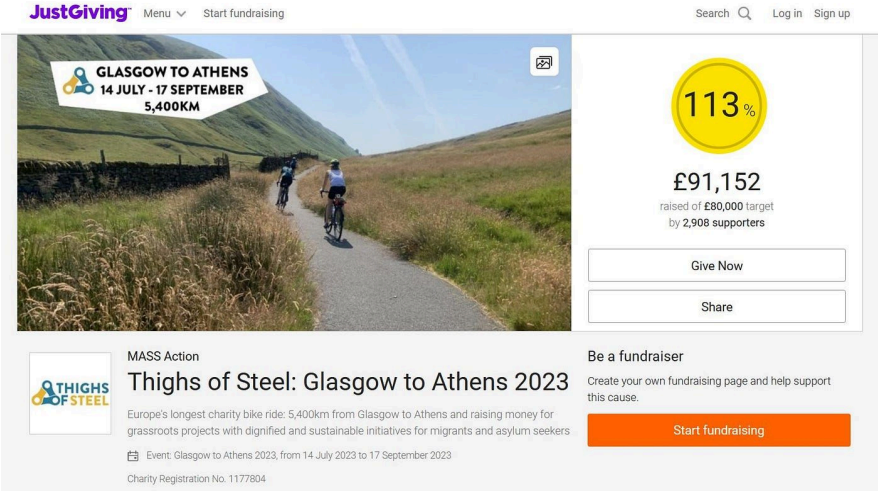
It's a bloody long trip: in fact, I'm pretty sure that it's Europe's longest fundraising bike ride.

It took our freewheeling community of 101 cyclists eight weeks of hard sweat to ride the full distance.

I was there at the beginning, rolling down from Glasgow Youth Hostel under drizzle skies, and I was there at the end in Athens, calves burning, asphalt melting, song shouting, up Mount Lycabettus, the steepest of all finish lines.

It feels mad weird to be unravelling our tyre tracks in only six days of diesel-powered vanlife.

Our community (including a fair few of you👋) has now raised over £90,000 for grassroots solidarity projects that support people on the move.



Sorry Not Sorry

I can't promise that I won't shut up about this fundraising for a few weeks because it's important to me to ensure this ride makes the biggest possible contribution to the grassroots solidarity movement.

It takes about eight months of hard work to prepare and launch Thighs of Steel. It's another three months of work to, not only cycle across the continent, but facilitate the experience and ensure a safe environment for more than 100 participants.

We don't do all that just for the jollies.

We do it to support grassroots solidarity initiatives, starved of cash in a hostile environment for people on the move.

Since 2016, Thighs of Steel cyclists have raised about £740,000 for projects like the Khora Collective's social kitchen, Hakoura Organic cooperative farm and the

Chamomile housing project for displaced people with mental health challenges.

If you believe in free movement, or even free-er movement for people having a rough time, you can share and donate here.🙏

The Flood

The final week of the ride brought together sixteen mostly-strangers to cycle 600km down the east coast of Greece from Thessaloniki to Athens.

That was the plan, anyway.

This was a week with some breathtaking highs — sunsets over Mount Olympus, sea swims and watermelons every day, hot springs and mineral mud baths, beach camps, olive groves and a spooky abandoned hotel resort frequented at all hours by teenage canoodlers.

But our little bike ride was, of course, dominated by the devastating floods left after Storm Daniel passed through central Greece.

Barely a week before we cycled through, the region was hit by more than a year's worth of rainfall in just 24 hours.

At least 17 dead. Homes, farms and villages wrecked over an area of 730 square km.



Thessaly floods. You can just about see where the reservoir used to be. Everything else was once fields, vineyards, homes — there's even an airport under there somewhere. Before Storm Daniel, this region provided 15 percent of Greece's domestic agricultural produce.

It will take five years for the bread basket of Greece to recover its soil fertility. Assuming no further catastrophe.

And that's a big assumption.

Finding A Way

We reached the floodlands on Day 3 of the ride. After an open discussion, one group of cyclists formed an advance party to find out whether our planned route was even remotely feasible.

From our beach camp, we climbed 20km up and over a mountain to gather more information (and a bag of frozen spinach) from the nearest town, Kalamaki.

The local supermarket owner encouraged us to try the old road that ran alongside the reservoir that had once drained the fertile plain. The reservoir had burst its banks and now the water stretched beyond the horizon.



The end of the road

At the end of the road, we found only a police blockade and had no choice but to cycle straight back over the same hill in the heat of the day with flies swarming our faces.

It wasn't the most fun I've ever had on a bicycle, but finding perspective was easy. A fly swarm sandwich is no hardship at all compared to the massive rescue and cleanup operation happening in the fields and villages below.



Former vineyards, former livelihoods

While we climbed back over the mountain, the rest of the cyclists pioneered a rocky off road route along a ribbon of coastline, which blessedly and eventually joined asphalt roads that, we were told, would circumnavigate the floodwaters.

Thank you to the people of Kamari for welcoming us in that night and letting us camp on their beautiful beach, now littered with storm debris, flotsam and jetsam swept down from the hills.

Almost cut off from the rest of the country, supplies of fresh food were at a premium in the coastal settlements. The crates stacked up on the back of a single pickup truck was all they'd seen for several days.

We were lucky. Our resourceful cyclists rustled up a dal dinner from the dry stores we'd brought with us from Glasgow — plus that long-defrosted bag of spinach.

Here & Now

Gazing out over the inland sea was a sobering reminder that climate disasters — massive and accelerating drivers of displacement — are here and now.

Globally, more than 20 million people are forced to flee their homes every year due to climate catastrophes.

Here and now.

Here and now, the kindness shown to us by the people of Thessaly was humbling. Their lands and in many cases their homes and livelihoods were underwater, yet everyone we met was open and supportive.

People helped us navigate off-road between devastated vineyards and orchards, find safe places to camp at night, and opened their shops, bakeries and cafes to we travellers.

These acts of generosity made a huge difference to us and helped us complete our quest.

The devastation we witnessed made each of us feel powerless in the face of inexorable nature.

The support we received from the local people made us feel strongly that anyone, any one of us, still has the power to make a difference.

We can still ride. We can still fundraise.

We can still tell the story of solidarity with people whose lives have been turned upside down by increasingly frequent disasters like the recent cyclone that struck Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey and Libya.

Even when we're up against unstoppable forces, we are not powerless. Small acts of solidarity are signficant.

So Thank You

Thank you to all the cyclists who made this final week, with all its highs and hardships, a supportive and joyful space.



The Thessaloniki-Athens cycling crew. Somewhere in the background: Athens.

Thank you to all our hosts and the dozens or hundreds of humans who supported us along the way, from the octogenarian neighbourhood watch in Thessaloniki who helped us *lift a car out of the way* so we could get out of our parking space, to the team at Vicious Cycles Athens who once again welcomed us with cold drinks and spray bike tattoos.

We've now raised over £90,000 for grassroots refugee solidarity projects through our charity partner, MASS Action.

2,908 people have already donated to the main page, anything from £5 and up. A fiver might not seem like much, but it could be a hot meal with friends for someone who might not have much of either during a difficult time in a hostile environment.

Thank YOU for all your donations and your sharing of our stories. This kind of fundraising, so important for organisations working on the ground, only works because of our shared networks.

Thank you for caring. Thank you to every person reading this.

We reserve our deepest gratitude for the people leading the real work, putting in a shift at projects that open up dignified and sustainable spaces for migrants and asylum seekers.

100 percent of your donation (more if you Gift Aid) will be redistributed by MASS Action to grassroots solidarity projects across the UK and Europe.

Every pound you donate makes the world a richer place. 🙏 This is happening, right now. Bring your friends.

Big love,
dc:

Gaping Abundance

19 January 2024

Happy Friday!

And a warm welcome, just generally. This has been a week punctuated by supersneezes and starlight.



Unbelievable (for this city dweller) starlight in the dark skies over the Lake District National Park. Side note: I just learned that Glasgow is the most light polluted place in the UK. Other side note: I'm impressed my phone does a ten second light-sucking exposure. I might post more like this while still in peak stargazing season.

I don't say this enough, but I'm feeling sentimental so: to those of you who support this newsletter financially, an especially warm thank you!

73 percent of this newsletter is based on books I read, digest and subsequently regurgitate in your vague direction — books I buy using money almost exactly like the money that some of you wonderful humans send my way. It's a virtuous cycle.

And it's cool that a couple of you made the most of the PayPal link that I dropped in last week — cheers! This way you can choose your own one-off

contribution.

Sometimes I watch the stars. (Usually for about five seconds before my hands freeze.)



Same sycamore as above, this time at dawn with a cloud inversion in the distance. Behold! The Lake District is pretty.

2024: Gaping Abundance

2024 will be my first year without a major Thighs of Steel cycle-raising adventure since 2017.

- 2023 & 2022: Glasgow to Athens co-organiser
- 2021: Spell It Out record-breaking co-organiser
- 2020: Around The World lockdown cyclist
- 2019: London to Athens core team facilitator
- 2018: Ljubljana to Sofia cyclist
- 2017: Bugger all

2017, it's fair to say, was not a great year. To be honest, I felt like shit most of the time — it was (famously) the year of raging Man Sloth Mode.

> For about a year, I did nothing…

Thighs of Steel, it's fair to say, saved my life. At least, it saved the purposeful part of me that needed something to *do*, rather than simply something to write (although it also helped with a heck of a lot of that).

The last three years in particular have been dominated, all year round, by organising and then riding Europe's longest charity bike ride. Ergo: 2024 has a whole lot of gaping hole where Thighs of Steel once was.

As well as crapping my pants about not having anything to do (nor any regular income — maybe why I'm feeling so sentimental about you folks 🥰), I'm also choosing to see this hole as a gaping abundance of opportunity.

Quite apart from all those Thighs of Steel bullet points, my life has changed a lot since 2017. I think this is best illustrated with a couple of photos, taken six years and about six miles apart:

In other words: six years is a lot of lifetime and there is no reason to suspect that the next six years will be anything other than, well, *full*. Almost certainly fuller of life than any previous six year segment in the soap opera Dave (now in its forty-second season) because (and here's the kicker) ***that's how life works, kiddo***.

If you thought childhood was wasted on the young, just wait until you try adulthood. It's amazing. All the dreams of youth, but with the utterly misplaced power to make those dreams a reality (or at least some updated adult version).

This time we have on earth is damnful of promise. If an hour when you were a kid was worth tuppence (who gets bored on their summer holidays? Kids, that's who), then an hour today is worth The Bank of England.

That's why it seems like our six year segments only get richer and richer as we age: we make our time count double and double again.

Time might seem to pass more quickly now we're older and, sure, part of that is because our brains are slowly calcifying, but it's also because we compress more meaning into our hours.

Now I'm an adult, I'll be devilled black and blue if I'm going to spend a second longer than I have to on anything that I don't see as majorly meaningful, even if (especially if) that means making my own meaning.

Everything I've done and almost every word I've written since 2017 has edged me closer to an expansively dense existence that prioritises the healing power of jolly well getting outside, and sharing those connective encounters and experiences with other people, both in the flesh and on the page (hello you 👋).

Thighs of Steel has been a huge chunk of that story so far, but it's by no means the end. More like the prologue.

This year, I have signed up to study for something called The Certificate in Advanced Wilderness Therapeutic Approaches.

Big scary title.

But, if my experience is anything to go by (not to mention the experience of the hundreds of people I've guided in the outdoors in the past six years), then the blockbuster slamdunk approach of all our therapeutic encounters with wild nature is this: ***healing by being***.

Unlike the pell-mell of what seems like everything else, nature is *there*.

Nature is there. Always there*. Simply there. Abundantly there. Quietly there. Raucously there. So go: go! See for yourself, feel for yourself. Slow down to tree time. Stretch yourself over aeons. Be outside forever. Lean your forehead against a tree and breathe in the oxygen that this living tree breathes out. Heal by being.

—

* Not necessarily always there if we fuck it up too much. Still: by and large, on our puny human timescales, it seems to be always there. Even if 'it' is a weed and 'there' are the cracks in the crumbling concrete of a carbon junky civilisation. 😘



Two humans healing by being on Great Rigg above Grasmere, looking south into the wintery sun.

You Can't Do Everything; Stop Trying

2023 will forever be remembered (by no one at all) as **The Year I Read Oliver Burkeman**.

Below are three links to three short-ish articles by the aforementioned Olly B, all warning us against the ironclad belief that we are immortal, a common belief that lures us into dangerous waters of endless distraction.

I am aware of the contradiction: more content to remind us to reserve our time for what's important.

So while you *could* open all these links in new tabs to join the serried ranks of recipes for Mexican fire ant soufflé, podcasts on crypto meta AI parody gameshows and videos about the perils of PVC double glazing that, gasping for attention, will all simultaneously autoplay on double speed in a dystopic Honey Smacks symphony of post-capitalist shock and awe, I wouldn't necessarily recommend that approach.

Instead, gently ponder my compression of the articles into sentence-length maxims that might transform your life for the wondrous better. (And the links

are there for those who love to flirt with deep water.)

- Ringfence 3-4 hours of focussed ‘deep’ work per day (AND NO MORE)
- You can only ever be doing one thing at a time, so your new to do list is only ever one task long: do that one task, then cross it out and add another single task to do
- The internet / news / library is a river to be dipped into, not a bucket to be emptied



Two sheep because why not?

If you enjoyed this story, then please remember that I have NO WAY OF KNOWING 😱 unless you heart, comment, reply or share.

Thanks for your eyeballs, thanks for your support.

Big love,
dc:

£760,000 and Out

30 December 2025

And a warm welcome from The Ness, where the sea is loud and the beach is stony.



Is this a metaphor?

Yes, that is too many hats.

In this newsletter, I write stories that help you and me understand the world (and ourselves) a little better.

In 2026, this newsletter will undergo a quiet metamorphosis: a butterfly that, each week or so, alights on a different leaf, inviting you into deeper connection with yourself, with others, and with the natural world around you.1

But, for now, we're still here in good ol' 2025.

It's been a wonderful year in my life for new beginnings. But also a reminder that, sometimes, good things come to an end.

Goodbye Thighs

Some of you best know me as one of the minds and legs behind refugee solidarity and fundraising bike ride Thighs of Steel.

It is with mixed emotions — mainly relief at this point — that we announced the closure of Thighs of Steel. We haven't ridden together since the stormy summer of 2023 and we won't be doing another ride.

Thighs of Steel was the defining act of my professional career and is the platform for everything I do from here on out.

I first joined the ride on its third edition in 2018, riding from Ljubliana to Sofia with a raggle taggle collection of some of the best humans I've ever met — few of whom classed themselves as 'proper cyclists'.

I had found my community.

£760,000 And Out

Thighs of Steel met adversity with action — far beyond the stories, songs and sweets we shared for the hills.

Together, we helped to bring thousands of people's attention to the systematic abuses suffered by displaced people living on the violent borders of Europe.

With these people's attention came their care. I'm still amazed that our little community raised over £760,000 for solidarity projects primarily run by refugees for refugees.

That is £760,000 transferred from some of the most privileged people in the world, those like us with homes and lives in peaceful European countries, to some of the most disenfranchised, fleeing the lives and homes they loved and cherished.

For five years, my participation with Thighs of Steel was something I was incredibly proud of.

Then, in 2023, it became way too fucking hard.

The Bear Hug of Success

In some ways, the ride was a victim of its own success.

Year after year since 2016, Thighs of Steel built a reputation for bringing together team after team of brilliant humans to do challenging bike adventures in a supportive environment that became almost cult-like.

If you were in, you were in. And, boy, did it feel good to be in.

But with the popular explosion in adventure cycling after the pandemic, and with our social media accounts pumped up by our 'Refugees Welcome' world record attempt in 2021, our reach extended far beyond our friends and their friends.

2022's ride from Glasgow to Athens was a huge hit. Sunny weather followed us for two months, all the way from Kelvingrove Park to Mount Lycabettus.

Every week's worth of cyclists brought a giddy wave of positive energy that catapulted us over every mountain range and into the generous arms of every host along the road.

Better yet: we raised more money than ever before for grassroots refugee projects in Greece and the UK.

Word got around.

In 2023, we sold out the ride in record time. Expectations were high.

In the cloudless summer of 2022, exceeding expectations was hard fought, but achievable.

In 2023, the weather — literally and metaphorically — turned on us.

Expectations, so jubilantly won, became a strangling bear hug, too much for our small community to hold in rolling thunder.

Flood, Sweat and Tears

The first rumblings of discontent came from the insurers.

A big claim the year before (not by us) had made the whole outdoor insurance industry jittery. I spent days on the phone trying to find someone to insure the ride — even looking into setting up our own security fund. No dice.

In the end, the insurers came through. I'm not sure they liked us, though.

They would've liked us even less if they truly understood what we were doing out there: novice cyclists, on unserviced bikes, on sometimes unpaved roads, on unresearched routes, through a dozen countries, wild camping, on two hours' sleep, in forty degree heat, in ferocious storms.

We left Glasgow in the rain. It didn't stop raining that summer. It didn't stop.

By the time we reached Greece — forget the ride — a once-in-a-generation storm had swept away the lives and livelihoods of the people living on the fertile floodplains of Thessaly.

One of our cyclists was badly hurt on the first day, a bolt of unseen metal puncturing his calf.

A few weeks later, our planned route mistakenly led cyclists along what eventually petered out into a narrow goat track, up the cliff edges of an Italian Alp.

Later that same day, another cyclist's brakes failed on the descent. She went over a cliff and was extremely fortunate that the impact that broke her collarbone didn't break her neck.

There were multiple outbreaks of a stomach bug.

It was really hard. Hard for me, as the only company director on the ride, to bear the responsibility of everything that could go wrong on such a venture, not to mention the genuine responsibility for the things that *had* gone wrong.

But we made it. No one died. Most people had a good time. Together, our tireless community of cyclists raised over £100,000 for refugee solidarity projects.

Phew.

Then, the day after we arrived in Athens, exhausted and relieved to be going home, we got a call from our partner charity.

A cyclist, who two months before we had refused entry to the ride, was making a formal complaint of discrimination against us.

This person had themselves been a refugee: who were we — a bunch of middle class white folk — to exclude them from a ride supposedly organised in

solidarity with refugees?

What Is This All About?

I won't go into the details of the complaint. That's not what today's story is about.

(If you want to read the whole 3000+ word explanation about why Thighs is closing, you can do that here.)

Today's story is about disagreement and learning to disagree well.

It's about how you can learn from what we *didn't* do.

It's about what I will do next time.

I want to give you a framework that will prepare you to move forward when the inevitable happens and you disagree *strongly* with friends, family, colleagues, partners — disagreement that is simply irreconcilable, when your unstoppable force meets their immoveable object.

What We Did — or What We Didn't Do

When we got back to the UK after the 2023 ride, Thighs of Steel entered into a facilitated resolution process with the cyclist concerned, which evolved into a drawn-out process of organisational soul-searching.

How, if at all, could Thighs of Steel move forward from here?

We spent over a year trying to find a solution and we failed. We failed because we fundamentally disagreed on what values should guide our solution.

Some of the team believed in an absolute restructuring of Thighs with anti-racism at our core, starting from our foundations and questioning our structures and processes to find where systemic injustices are being replicated within our organisation.

In practice, this approach would mean either replacing ourselves as organisers or closing the organisation.

Others — myself included — believed in a more incremental process of improving procedure and increasing inclusivity, building on how Thighs has

operated in the past and integrating anti-racist principles as we went along.

In practice, as a small community with limited resources, this approach would mean compromising on inclusivity and risking only paying lip service to our anti-racist ideals.

Neither of these approaches is right or wrong, but with two opposing values on how to approach a solution, our conversations came to a standstill and, as so often happens with voluntary or part-time labours of love, bills needed paying and lives moved on.

In the absence of any forward resolution, our only fallback option was closure.

No right, no wrong, but, strange as it may sound, our irreconcilable differences were foreseeable and, indeed, inevitable.

If not this grievance, if not 2023, then something else, some other year.

Our differences were baked into how we set up the organisation. Or rather, in how we did *not* set up.

And this is where I can help you today.

Guided By ~~Vibes~~ Values

Thighs of Steel was always guided by vibes.

Our only published mission was to 'ride really far for good reason'.

The 'good reason' was fundraising for a charity that distributed funds to grassroots refugee solidarity projects across Europe.

I think everyone involved would say that Thighs of Steel was so much more than either of these two public statements. But that's all we had to fall back on, all that was ever set out on tablets of stone or pixels of internet.

We never codified our community values and never wrote up *how* we rode together. We never had any standard operating procedures or any of the other bits of paper that hold communities and companies together when the going gets tough.

We were friends, first and foremost, and we organised bike rides for our friends, first and foremost.

We certainly didn't have a plan for what to do when we strongly disagreed with each other.

You don't need to make that same mistake.

Here's what you can do instead — here's what I will do next time.

And, by the way, this isn't just for organisations like Thighs of Steel. This works just as well for any relationship where you might have a strong disagreement at any point in your lives.

In other words: every worthwhile relationship.

How Do We Disagree?

Find a quiet moment with you and your colleagues, partners, family.

Ask yourselves these five questions:

1. What core values are non-negotiable for everyone?

Name them explicitly, in precise language that you all understand. You want something solid you can all hold onto in a crisis, not bubble bath.

Accept that deciding core values at the start of a venture will exclude some people from the beginning, but at least they can see where the lines are drawn.

Core values pass *all three* of the following tests — anything else is at most only a supporting value:

1. Identity: 'If we lost this, we would no longer be us.'
2. Decision-guiding: 'We are willing to sacrifice time, money and/or status to uphold this.'
3. Existing practice: 'This is central to how we already make sense of our actions.'

Aim for 3-5 core values. If you have more, can you cluster them together? If you have fewer, something is probably missing. Ask yourself or ask others: what makes this organisation or community truly special?

For each value, write a short definition, illustrated with 3–5 'this looks like / does not look like' behaviours.

How this would've helped us at Thighs of Steel: Which do we value more highly: inclusion or action?

2. What is our shared vision? What is our 'destination'?

This vision should be:

- Brief.
- Clear.
- Future-oriented.
- Challenging.
- Stable over time.
- Inspiring.
- Image-rich.

How this would've helped us: Is our vision to have a ride that is genuinely open to all, or to maximise fundraising for other refugee-led solidarity projects?

3. What is our shared mission?

- Who do we serve? Who are our stakeholders, customers, communities?
- What are we creating together? What are our products and services, what needs are we addressing, what problems solving?
- How do we do what we do? What is our core approach, what are our distinctive capabilities? How do our values look like in action?

How this would've helped us: Are our primary stakeholders refugee cyclists or refugee-led solidarity projects? Are we solving the problem of funding for

grassroots refugee solidarity projects, or are we addressing a need for cyclists to go on adventures that also do good? Is wild camping core to our approach, or not?

4. When our values collide — and they will — how do we decide what to do next?

- Consensus? And what happens when we can't reach consensus?
- Majority? And what happens to the minority?
- Minority? For example a Senior Leadership Team or Trustees.
- Designated 'boss' decision-maker? And how do we sense-check tyrants?
- Or do we pause and seek external support? In which case: who?

How this would've helped us: When we got stuck, how do we make and enact a decision to move us forward? Forget *what* to decide — we didn't even really know *how*.

5. If all else fails, how will we make sure we end well?

- How and when will we decide to end? Who has that authority? What if only one person thinks time's up?
- How will we share the difficult emotions around disagreement and closure to ensure there is no lasting unresolved or ill feelings?
- Who takes on the administrative and practical tasks around closing? Who is legally responsible?
- What do we want our stakeholders and the outside world to understand about our ending? What should *not* be said publicly, out of care for those involved?
- Will we mark the ending? How?

How this would've helped us: A clear ending process would have helped us structure a difficult decision and distribute the responsiblity.

How These Questions Help You

Ultimately, all five of these questions are designed to give you and your co-conspirators a heap of tools to help you make decisions when things get hard.

They won't make the hard decisions any less hard to take, but they will remove a lot of emotional labour and uncertainty out of the process of taking those decisions.

Hopefully these questions will keep you together, but if they don't, at least you will know why and at what point to go your separate ways, without regret.

Ultimately, what I've learnt from the past two years is that vibes aren't enough to keep a good thing going. We need the framework, provided by our answers to these five questions, to hold our hardest disagreements.

Thank You

Huge thanks to all the paying subscribers who helped make this story possible. You know who you are. Thank you. 💚

If you enjoyed this one, then go ahead and tell me. It's the only way I'll know. You can tap the heart button, write a comment, share the newsletter with friends, or simply reply to this email.

If you're not into the whole Substack subscription thing, then you can also make a one-off, choose-your-own-contribution via PayPal. That'd make my day.

As always, thank you for your eyeballs and thanks for your support.

diwyc,
dc:

1
That wonderful mission triplet is borrowed from New Forest Off Road Club, who are 'connecting people with themselves, others and the Forest'. I greatly admire NFORC's clarity of mission and values, the subject of today's story. I know in the past that they have also delivered workshops on how to find your own mission and values, so do get in touch with them to ask if you are interested.

Where next

All of David's stories, including the other long rides, are free to read at davidcharles.info/series.

Every Friday David sends a short story about adventure, nature and being human to readers of his newsletter. To join them, visit davidcharles.substack.com.

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