

THOUGHTS ON THE ROAD

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“Oh tell me where your freedom lies. The streets are fields that never die.” - Jim Morrison

Upon returning from Newfoundland, I realized that my motorcycle trip there had provided the break I needed in my ABATE duties to help me rediscover where my freedom lies. I needed to refresh my spirit in order to carry on the “good fight.” Because of my trip I was out of touch with some of the particulars on the state level and federal level, but while riding I did a lot of thinking on a personal level about freedom.

After thousands of miles thinking about freedom, I feel I’ve located the source of our communication problem among other motorcyclists and with the non-motorcycling public. I arrived at this position as I kept thinking about that Jim Morrison line, “Oh tell me where your freedom lies.”

Freedom has as many meanings as there are individuals to perceive it. It is not only different for each individual, it has different thematic definitions according to entire areas of thought, i.e. psychology, art, political philosophy, religious conviction, secular culture or big business. At the heart of our communication problem is the reality that most individuals profess to be devoted to freedom when it is held up as an abstraction, painted with a very broad brush, but when it gets down to specifics of how each individual thinks he ought to be able to exercise that freedom the unqualified support for freedom breaks down. Each one cares about his own small area of interest, but has no time to defend someone else’s area of interest which doesn’t have apparent importance for him. Sometimes there are whole groups with a common interest who organize to promote their particular concept of freedom. Still, it all breaks down because each group believes its cause to be absolute and sees the beliefs of another group as a threat to its own convictions or existence.

We who espouse motorcyclists’ rights consti-

tute a minority within a minority. We face opposition even within the motorcycling population because we have not yet figured out a way to get other motorcyclists to recognize us as their brothers and sisters on the most basic level of freedom. In addition, we have not figured out a way to get other Americans to recognize us as brothers and sisters who share a fundamental concept of freedom which underlies everyone’s multiplicity of interests. To obtain this recognition and acknowledgement is the crux of our problem, and it is a major and complex task.

Some would say that “freedom” is a series of rights. Exactly what is a right? To define what is meant by a “right” is as problematic as to define what is meant by “freedom.” Suppose if what one person perceives as a right interferes with the exercise of what another perceives as his “right”? Whose “right” is more valuable? If a majority of the populace holds a belief in a certain right, do they then have the right to limit the rights of the minority? Conversely, does a minority have a right to be protected from the dictates of a majority because it perceives its rights to be infringed solely on the basis that it is a minority? We need all our energy focused on the delineation of rights in the quest for freedom’s meaning and exercise.

Searching out the meaning of freedom seems essential to all efforts to maintain, expand and protect it from any assault. If we are to claim freedom at all, how else do we prove that it exists? Our first inclination is to define it using the most inclusive terms possible. In defining freedom we attempt to license a broad range of conduct so as to include conduct we presently sanction and anticipate future conduct yet undefined. Future circumstances always create situations previously unimaginable. The authors of the Bill of Rights struggled to create a document that enshrined enduring principles of freedom but which allowed adaptability as times and circumstances changed.

If we as Americans agree that freedom exists, can we measure it scientifically? If we observe that there are degrees of freedom, does that mean that there is a totality of freedom that can be subdivided, carved up into any number of pieces that can be enumerated and classified? This begs the question, can we possess only some degree of freedom but not absolute freedom? Within the given constraints of a civilized society, must we relinquish some part of our freedom in order to function as part of a community structure? What do we have to say about what is relinquished? How do we obtain freedom? Is it conferred upon us by some unknowable omniscient force? Is it conferred upon us by some governmental entity, or do we organize ourselves as rank and file individuals to wrest those freedoms we desire from entrenched government power?

We must remember that our government was founded on the basis that the people give the government its right to govern, not that the government gives the people the right to be free.

I don't believe there is one of us who hasn't at some point in life grappled with these thorny questions to some extent. What those of us involved with motorcyclists' rights have in common is that each of us through personal experience has found a highway along which we have discovered that these questions are of monumental importance to us. We are not like the slumbering multitudes of Americans who go about their daily routines with little more than the awareness of sheep in a herd.

The common vehicle that has brought us all together is the motorcycle, in both its knowable forms as a material object and as the symbol of an experience of freedom. Something which unites us so strongly overcomes our many personal differences. We must find more creative ways to reach out to the rest of the motorcycling community and beyond. This is the high road, but it is not the only road.

Theoretically speaking, we formulate our communication to address the noblest instincts of human nature. Practically speaking, we undervalue the importance of also formulating communication which addresses the baser side of human nature. If we put lofty ideals aside for a moment,

and try to penetrate to the underlying structure of our society, sooner, rather than later, we will arrive at a primary generator of power and influence which is money. Let us also set moral concerns aside temporarily. If we isolate the cause of most contests over power and control in our society, no matter how cleverly they may be masked in rhetoric, or veiled in the guise of moral concerns, we find that it is money and the two emotions money engenders, namely, greed or altruism. I see greed as the far more prevalent motivator.

Money is absolutely essential to survival. Those who have been smart enough, lucky enough, or greedy enough to amass fortunes may not be in the majority, but their power derives in large part from persuasion of those who struggle to maintain a moderate living standard, that their survival or their modest level of comfort and security are at risk. What is really achieved is not the protection of the average person's quality of life, but the protection and enhancement of the fortunes and power of the wealthy.

Frightened or angry people will vote against their own best interests and do so regularly. The wealthy and powerful are experienced and adept at engineering this, so while we argue the value of lofty ideals, it cuts no ice with someone who is being told that our freedom to pursue our chosen lifestyle is going to cost that individual his job, or take money out of his paycheck or make him pay more in taxes.

We won't ever repeal a helmet law or get justly deserved insurance coverage as long as big business and "fat cat" politicians can convince the ordinary citizen that we, suspect minority as we are consistently portrayed, are snatching the bread from the mouths of decent, hard-working folks just to be able to engage in our foolhardy pursuits which we call freedom. Our strategy has to include consideration of this reality. A road construction worker in Pennsylvania is not going to support passage of the repeal of Section 153 of ISTEA while he is being told he'll be laid-off if it passes. He doesn't care about our freedom if it means his job. We have not yet formulated a compelling appeal to nobler instincts which out-

weighs preoccupation with perceived negative economic consequences. If we are to have any chance at all against overwhelming odds it must come from analysis of how the enemies of freedom operate no matter how they disguise their motives and methods. We must develop our communication strategy accordingly while also striving to articulate salient fundamental arguments for freedom.