

Foreword



In 2000, Mary Collins got into a bicycle crash in Alexandria, Virginia, a densely populated suburb outside of Washington, D.C. She suffered multiple crushing injuries; some that would be repaired over time, and some that she would have to learn to live with, including ruptured disks in her back and a damaged sense of hearing and smell. I have only known Mary in her post-crash life. I came to know her because she was writing this book, and I was one of the many cold calls she made as part of her research. Mary describes our meeting in one of her chapters so I won't do it here. What I will do is tell you that despite a loss of hearing, Mary is a gifted listener and an extraordinary storyteller. This book is part travel, part autobiographical, part research. It's an artichoke—part vegetable, part flower, many interesting layers. Urban planners, anthropologists, archeologists, public-health professionals, sports trainers, historians, scientists, adventurers, and just about anyone who has an interest in people and places will find something to connect to in *American Idle*.

I believe Mary wrote the book because she experienced the loss of her physical self—a self that she had been very proud of as an athlete. Her physical comeback has been hard fought, and it caused her to look at human behavior and modern lifestyle trends in a different way and with a deeper sensitivity, in the same way we might appreciate the absence of pain only when we are in pain or appreciate walking only when we are immobilized. Without realizing it, many of us have lapsed into a state of being idle, and unlike the bear that Mary describes in her visit to the National Zoo, “We cannot convert nitrogen into protein, go months without drinking or urinating, or retain bone mass

without moving.” A bear can emerge from its cave at the end of winter and move right into bear society without an intense regimen of physical therapy or pharmaceuticals. Figuratively speaking, a bear could go from cave to bicycle and do it well. Humans, on the other hand, are a different story.

Movement is essential to our well-being. The cessation of movement or the gradual withdrawal from everyday activity is why more than 20 percent of adults are obese in every state except Colorado and why children are increasingly being diagnosed with heart disease and diabetes. Too many of us are ignoring the basic truth about our own health and well-being and have fallen asleep in the poppy fields drunk with the machines that let us remain idle. Too many of us, for example, view March as a time to watch the Final Four from the comforts of a soft couch or a seat at the bar, rather than a great time to enjoy a bicycle ride, a brisk run, or a walk around the neighborhood to go crocus spotting, mail a letter, or string a few errands together.

Forty percent of all trips made in the United States are just two miles or less and yet the vast majority of all trips are made by car. These short trips are the easiest to shift to bicycling and walking and also the most polluting and energy intensive. But rarely do we consider the benefits of walking and bicycling, the costs of not walking or bicycling, or the cumulative impact of not being physically active. Rarely do we consider the public policies that make it difficult to walk or bike, favor highways over walkways, and that promote big-box land use. Too many parents are afraid to let their children go out and play, and we’ve become okay with that. In a single generation, we have gone from a nation where most kids walk or bike to school to one where fewer than 15 percent do. If the trend continues, the walk to school will begin to sound like a Paul Bunyan tale.

As the executive director of the National Center for Bicycling & Walking, promoting walking and bicycling is a full-time job for me. I promote these activities not only because of the physical benefits, but also because if we replaced even some of the trips we make by automobiles with bicycling or walking, the polar bear cubs wouldn’t be drowning and, closer to home, not as many kids would be suffering from respiratory diseases. If we invested in making roadways and communities safer for bicyclists and pedestrians, it is likely that more people, including children, would walk and bike, and most

importantly, they would arrive alive, and as some studies point out, more intellectually stimulated.

Nationally, pedestrians and bicyclists account for 13 percent of roadway fatalities but less than 1 percent of safety funding is spent on improvements to make roads safer for pedestrians and bicyclists. Removing the barriers to walking and biking and making these activities safer, convenient, and more viable will go a long way to getting people out of their caves and on their heels.

I don't know the details of the crash that nearly paralyzed Mary; her loss of memory of that incident makes it impossible to retell the story. But it is quite possible that if we invested a little more into safe and complete streets—the kinds of streets that accommodate motor vehicles as well as bicycles and pedestrians—Mary would not have been run over. Walking and biking are like frogs—the indicator species of a healthy place. These activities bring us to places where we interact more with people and the environment.

This book will introduce you to people like Jane Jacobs, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, and a champion for social and environmental justice long before those phrases had a defined meaning. Ms. Jacobs understood the importance of preserving places people could move through on foot; *American Idle* continues and expands on Jacobs' line of thought.

In elementary school, we learn about the settling of the West, the great expedition of Lewis and Clark, the marchers in the Civil Rights movement, but few of us ever stop to think about the vital role of physical movement in these great American moments. Under the power of Mary's pen, we are reminded of this and of the current skewed ratio of stillness to movement in our daily lives. By interviewing a huge range of people, Mary captures the habits and thoughts of the young, the old, the immigrant, and the expert.

I recently picked up a copy of John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*. In the introduction, Steinbeck writes about collecting marine animals. He describes "certain flat worms as being so delicate that they are almost impossible to capture whole. You must let them ooze and crawl of their own will onto a knife blade and then lift gently into your bottle of sea water. And perhaps that might be the best way to read this book—to open the page and to let the stories crawl in by themselves."

When I read that last line, I thought of this book. The best way to read *American Idle* is to let the stories—Mary’s story, the story of our cultural and physical de-evolution into a sedentary state, and the stories of all the people she interviewed—crawl in.

But understand there is a cautionary tale here. As human beings, our future, our ability to remain vibrant healthy beings, depends on a steady diet of activity. We can be boards or we can be sponges. Boards are stiff and rigid. They stay in place. Sponges absorb and flex; with a little water they spring into action.

—SHARON Z. ROERTY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL CENTER FOR
BICYCLING & WALKING