

# HPV

Occasional piece, unpublished  
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**I**T IS AN HPV, a Human Powered Vehicle, but my neighbors think it's only a WB, Weird Bike. When I whirr past they shake their heads, "That's the guy, you know, who writes kid's books. He set his hair on fire. No lie. Weird guy, up all hours of the night, forgets to put his trash out, FedEx guy here all the time bringing God knows what. He's probably On Something."

The only thing I'm On is a deadline or an HPV, and *anyone* could sing their hair that way. Everyone's had trouble using one of those long lighters to start their grill. Click. Click. No flame. Aha, you say logically, it's out of gas, and you put it up to your ear to listen for the hiss. Click. Poof. It's just a good thing I don't use hairspray or I'd be a dead man, and everyone's had a bad haircut. It grows out.

One neighbor brought up neighborhood peer disapproval obliquely by reporting that the woman down the hill believes I bought the HPV "just to look weird." This from a woman who wears jungle camouflage curlers. I wish to state publicly that being on a normal bike looks weird enough. Put Leonardo di Caprio in a reflective padded bike helmet with three-point chin-buckle straps, stuff his right pant leg into his sock so it doesn't get caught in the sprockets, and he will bear an eerie resemblance to Alfalfa from Our Gang. I want points for not wearing the full-weird bicycle gear: three-tone Spandex cycling shorts with the chamois crotch, high visibility nylon knit shirt with lower-back pockets for water bottles, string-crocheted leather-padded fingerless gloves, and those elfin cycling shoes with the turned-up toes. J. Edgar Hoover once wore a similar outfit in the privacy of his suite at the Mayflower.

My HPV is a recumbent bicycle. Instead of hunching over the drooped handlebars of a touring bicycle in the posture of an upended Inca mummy, the rider of a recumbent reclines, feet forward, against a comfy backrest in a graceful, even regal posture. This position maximizes the potential force of the legs, is easy on the back, offers a smooth low-impact aerobic workout, and is distinctly less weird in theory and practice than Jazzercise. This HPV is a long, low, sleek machine with twenty-one gears, a twenty-inch driving wheel aft and a smaller steering wheel forward. I've wanted one for years. I bought it at the Annapolis Boat Show.

The boat show was a great place to buy an HPV. Everyone was trying so hard to look like a real shopper, an earnest buyer willing to make an impulse purchase of a \$500,000 ketch. All the vendors were scanning the crowd like apprehensive Secret Service agents, trying to recognize likely buyers from subtle telltales: a middle-aged man with a manic gleam, a matron with indications of plastic surgery, or a couple accompanied by a line of Nubian bearers carrying baskets of Krugerrands. A guy like me is invisible. I visited a couple of cycle vendors touting weatherproof folding stainless steel bikes with cantaloupe-

sized wheels and alloy parts, apparently suitable for riding ashore along the bottom of the harbor. One had brought this splendid recumbent bicycle to catch the eye of a jaded sheik or a bored cardiologist. It was late in the show, the stock market had fallen, the vendor was dispirited, I struck a good bargain and wheeled away from the Annapolis Greed and Avarice Show with an HPV and three sail ties (the ties were very colorful and a bargain @ \$2 apiece).

I went to the bike shop to pick up a few necessities. The twenty-something tekkie caressing the knobbier parts of extreme mountain bikes (we have but few mountains, hereabouts) finally noticed me and nodded wisely at my description of the HPV, “Yah,” he allowed, “a lot of older folks are getting those.” He was kind enough not to add, “Along with pacemakers and hair transplants.” I wanted to seize one of his tattoos in a brake clamp and tell him that I was a player in the sixties, boyo, and I’ve seen more lubricity and strange women than you’ll ever imagine. But he looked like he needed a nap. I bought a weird bike helmet, a pump, and a long fiberglass wand with an orange flag on the end.

This whip and flag is designed to dance and flutter to alert drivers that there is something under it. Without the flag, I reasoned, they wouldn’t see a bike or even an HPV. Most of them don’t see my large car bearing down on them as they pause in an intersection to do their taxes or call 900 numbers on their cell phones. But I fear the flag does more harm than good. Riding in the streets of Annapolis, I stay carefully to the right, make good turn signals and attempt to ride as little like a bike courier as I can without carrying the bike. Even so, I’ve been shouted at half a dozen times, usually from pickup trucks: “Stay off the road!” is a favorite; “Get on the sidewalk!” is another. These drivers believe — passionately, to judge by the anger and Anglo-Saxon invective that accompany their helpful messages — that I am stopping the flow of American commerce by playing in the street. They may be concerned for my safety, knowing better than I how unskillfully they drive. Perhaps they have friends in Bahrain or the Arab Emirates and are concerned about oil sales. The orange flag may simply be too ... recreational. I’m almost sure they wouldn’t shout at me if I substituted a Confederate battle flag but that would open me to lawsuits for political insensitivity. I can’t blame them for not knowing that it is illegal to ride a bicycle on sidewalks because this would require reading skills.

All over Europe and Asia, the bicycle is an important mode of transportation for citizens of all ages. This is because their gasoline is unsubsidized and costs upwards of \$3.50 a gallon. Driving, in those backward nations, is thought of as a skill rather than a basic human right. They probably haven’t progressed far enough to have “DON’T HONK, I’M RELOADING” bumper stickers or NO FEAR decals on their back windows. Naively, I assumed that conserving a little Arab oil, getting some exercise, and looking at the sweet, low country around the Bay would be inoffensive. I also thought I’d get in practice: since we’ve gone back to “full sized” cars and SUVs there isn’t that much oil left. Suddenly I’m a subversive. And weird in the bargain.

Travelling by HPV is useful and revealing. The bicycle is a slow machine unencapsulated by glass and steel. You are part of the weather. You see and smell things you missed before. You learn topography: I've become aware of a hundred stiff hills I didn't even notice as a quickening in my car's engine. A human powered vehicle pretty good at moving, but it's even better at stopping. Stopping at places you've never bothered with or even noticed. Like the tiny, forlorn National Cemetery caught in the traffic angles of a new traffic circle on West Street. I turned into the seldom-used drive and discovered the resting-place of 2000 soldiers and sailors of four wars, 211 unknown soldiers, and a towering amount of honor.

If it's okay with you, I will continue to humanly power my weird vehicle on the far right of the road and see as much as I can. I apologize for the orange flag; thanks for noticing it, though. Traffic patterns in Annapolis are already surreal. I doubt that adding bike lanes here and there, designating some bi-walks, replacing some wheel-catcher drain covers, and having a few more bike crossing signs would make it any less like a trip through a pinball machine. It would be comforting if all the towns around the Bay, really wonderful country for biking, would encourage pickups to share the road with HPVs.

[1336 words]