

Pedal Harder: A eulogy for Glen Lapp

by Joe Lapp

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Good afternoon, and thank you everyone for coming. Glen's family is grateful for your support.

My name is Joe. Glen Lapp was my cousin and one of my best friends. I am five years younger than him, and so when we were young I looked up to him; as we grew up our friendship grew as well. Then, as for so many of Glen's friends, our relationship was cemented during a travel adventure we had together. And so, because so many have connected with him in this way, I want to celebrate his life by sharing something about my own epic adventure with Glen.

When I think of Glen, I think of biking. This is because, together, in 2002, we rode from his house here in Lancaster across the United States to Seattle and down the west coast. Between the end of August and the beginning of December we put in over 5,000 miles, sleeping in the same tent together, riding through the sun and the rain together, for three months rarely more than a quarter mile distant from each other. We carried our own gear, plotted our daily course off of paper AAA road maps, camped beside barns and streams, ate peanut butter sandwiches with brown sugar, lived like kings.

It was glorious. Spending every day exercising in the open air, we grew lean and strong, learned to trust each other, to be open to the adventure of the moment. We laughed a lot, because laughter, with Glen, came so easily. Over the last week, I've been so thankful that I was able to have such a great time of freedom and adventure and

laughter with Glen; and I know that many of you have similar moments that you remember when you think of him.

I want to celebrate Glen by remembering the things he taught me on that trip, like how good a ripe red cherry tomato from a farm stand in western Pennsylvania is when you just pop it in your mouth. He taught me how to pack light, how to make light of the rigors of nightly camping, how the best thing to do when you wake up in the morning to frozen water bottles and frosty air is get out of the tent and get on the bike, start pedaling to warm up. He taught me how to live on our five-dollar-a-day-each budget, and how to ask others for things we needed then gratefully appreciate their generosity. These are not the kinds of things I would have done on my own, but because Glen was there I did them, and because he enjoyed it so did I.

He taught me, too, to appreciate mountains, playing up the spectacularity of Mount Rainier all the way across the Midwest and enduring me, who had never seen it, cheekily scoff at his superlatives. But when we emerged atop a pass on a cloudless October day in the Washington state Cascade range, he had the last word, for behold, there was the mountain, and it was indeed as spectacular and as beautiful as he had said.

I remember as well how he cared for me on that trip. I had never done any serious long distance riding before, had never ridden with clipless pedals (that's the kind that attach to your shoes). Glen helped me buy my first good bike, helped me pick gear, assured me that I could get in shape on the road. He was infinitely patient as I made stupid beginner mistakes, like thinking it was a good idea to wear underwear underneath my bike shorts - it's not, trust me. On a frigid day in eastern Montana, his own hands shaking with cold, he stooped down and wrapped my biking shoes with duct tape to

help keep the biting wind from my feet. This is simply how he lived, with a unique ability to sense and then meet the needs of others.

Though most of my biking adventures with Glen happened on our cross-country trip, I've also gone riding with him and Ernie and their friends here in Lancaster several times. Whenever I went out with them, I was usually out of shape, and I'd spend myself early then get tired by the end. Trouble was, there was always this one section close to home – a long, sweeping curve – where Ernie and friends, who had pedaled relatively mildly for most of the ride, would suddenly throw down and start riding really hard.

After Glen's death, memories of this speeding curve were one of the first that came to me. And this is because, every time, in my hour of need he was my savior. When he saw me dropping off, unable to keep up, he would always come back to get me.

"Let's go, let's go, come on," he'd shout, madly waving his hand for me to get on his back wheel. I'd find my last shred of strength to hold on to his lead as he tried to drag me forward. I don't think I ever was able to bridge the gap, but I loved Glen for caring enough to help me try, for being my link to the rest of the pack. This is how he was – he wanted to have fun, but he wanted you to have fun too, and he knew it would be the most fun if you could do it together.

But just because he was caring doesn't mean that he was soft. On the contrary, he had a high level of resilience, a love of pushing himself to the limit, just to see what he could do.

On the bike, his remedy for everything was simple: pedal harder. Are you cold? pedal harder (it'll warm you up). Are you hot? pedal harder (the breeze will cool you off). Are

you tired? pedal harder (you'll get there sooner). A little saddle-sore? pedal harder (miraculously, that does actually work).

On our trip, in Oregon, we raced to the top of a mountain. Glen beat me, pulling away and out of sight over the last mile. When I got to the summit parking lot, I found him lying on the pavement beside his bike, curled up in a fetal position, gasping for breath in deep spasms, utterly spent; but of course completely happy that he had won.

This combination of caring and toughness is what allowed him to thrive in a place like Afghanistan, a post known for its austerity and challenges. At the time that Glen went to Kabul, I lived in Pakistan, and so we talked about the challenges of living and working in a developing country where security was a constant worry.

When he went, he knew the assignment would not be easy. There would be a new language to learn, a foreign culture to understand, and spartan living on a volunteer's stipend far away from home and family.

But Glen knew how to live simply, loved to explore new places and cultures. And so the biggest challenge for him, I think, was the confinement often necessitated by the security situation in Afghanistan. For an adventure and sports loving person like Glen, this was no easy hardship.

He learned, though, in his un-defeatable manner, to take joy in the small opportunities that came his way. He loved to play volleyball, for example, a sport he enjoyed playing with Cheryl Beckett, another one of the ten members of that last trip to Nuristan. He reveled in the liberation of, now and then, being able to pull off a hike in the hills outside of Kabul.

He especially enjoyed the chances he had to travel within Afghanistan, going at different times to Herat, to the legendary Panjshir Valley, over the Salang Pass made famous in the Russian invasion. Once he even got to do a multi-day mountain biking trip. He often used the word “beautiful” when he talked about Afghanistan.

And so, when I first saw the internet news headlines, a group of aid workers coming back from an eye camp in the north of the country, I knew this was about Glen, for if there was not a natural place on such a trip for him, I knew Glen would have talked his way onto it. For him, it was the trip of a lifetime.

On this last trip, crossing starkly beautiful mountains to bring assistance to a people largely forgotten by the rest of the world, I'm sure his heart sang. He didn't mind the rock-strewn trails, the thin air of the high pass, the constant need to manage gear and donkeys. No, high up on the earth, close to heaven, he was in his element.

There is a divide in this world, the kind of divide we often glibly describe as being between the 'haves and the have nots' or perhaps between 'the West and the East,' though the reality is much more complex.

When villagers in Africa still endure every year the hungry season, when women in Afghanistan take acid in the face for breaking the rules of seclusion, we catch a glimpse of the chasm. It is even here in this country, in our ghettos, sometimes in immigrant communities, wherever racism or poverty or culture still forces people to live apart and in opposition.

Glen was doing his best to cross this divide. His belief that God did *not* intend for

poverty and injustice and conflict to flourish led him to do something about these evils.

During my time in Pakistan I was able to interview a few Afghan refugees about why they fled Afghanistan. Some of these refugee families had been in Pakistan for twenty or thirty years, so long has their country suffered unrest and neglect. One woman told me matter-of-factly how, in Afghanistan, fighters had stormed into her house, shot and killed her brother, wounded her husband. Her story, I came to realize, was horrifyingly typical.

This is the kind of cruel legacy that Glen was in Afghanistan to counteract, working to bring peace to a country too long devastated by war. We can't know the full story of how he touched the lives of those in need in this vital but often neglected country, or how they touched his, but I know that his work brought forth fruit both for the people around him and for himself. He did not spend his life in vain.

Ok, one last story. When Glen lived down in the canyon, in Havasupai – part of the Grand Canyon system in Arizona – I was with a group of cousins who hiked down to visit him. We left the canyon rim later than expected, and had to take most of the five or six hour hike in the dark. Glen, from his house way down at the bottom, had been walking up to meet us, and we were grateful for his able guidance as the light fell and we had to pick our way by flashlight.

He was the only one of our group in shape for such a trek, and so after several hours on the trail, with the number of sore feet and legs and backs growing, we started to ask Glen, "Are we there yet? How long now, how long until we get there?" "Oh, don't worry," Glen replied, "we're just a stone's throw away."

Reenergized, we walked faster. But soon we had covered a distance much greater than what most of us judged might be "a stone's throw," and we still hadn't arrived. When someone pointed this out, Glen simply repeated, "Oh, it's ok, *now* it's just a stone's throw away." This cycle repeated itself more than once, until, I confess, we all got a bit mad at him. We did finally arrive, and of course the next morning we laughed at his idea of just how far a stone might be thrown.

Now, I'm trying to comprehend what it will be like to never have another adventure with Glen; but I hope to laugh again with him some day soon. Because really, Glen, you're just a stone's throw away.