

## An Unending Journey

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Where do we want to go? *Why* do we even want to go?

I thought going back to biking after many years would have been easy. I had my first bike when I was in grade school; I was 8 or 9 years old then. It was a BMX with a shiny red frame. I got into biking because my neighbors were into it as well—like how I’m going into biking now because everyone seems to be into it. It’s not really a choice for many of us now, however. When the government banned public transport willy-nilly, people had to improvise; they either had to walk long distances or bike longer distances. It’s like being born into the world: we never really chose to be here. We just have to live, and improvise our way through.

It was taxing to choose my adult bike. I had to browse through vlogs to decide on which bike to buy with the meager budget that my Instructor salary in UP can afford. With no bike infrastructure in the Philippines, which one could survive the harsh conditions of our world-class roads? Gears, hydraulic disk brakes, frame size, saddle height—can’t I just attend a one-stop orientation for these?

I finally settled on a 16-kilogram, 10-speed bike, with a China-made frame. It’s not the best, but it does the job—as one would expect from anything mass-produced in China, like our vaccines. Every break of dawn, I ride out excited about my newfound hobby, and terrified at the prospect of not making my purchase sulit. I went out every morning, reaching personal records every day—6km, 14km, 20km. It was exhilarating, to say the least. Beginning is

often like that: confronted with the prospect of a life ahead of us, we push ourselves without knowing what will meet us in the end.

After reaching 20km, there was only so much I could reach with the time I have and the places I know. I had less and less motivation to bike in the morning. With the spare time I had, I had no place else to go but UP. I seemed to have reached my peak.

Earlier this year, I had the chance to reconnect with my coursemates from my undergrad days. Apparently, some of them started biking too so we decided to come together on weekends. The company helped me a lot as they pushed me to go farther and higher. Our group eventually brought me to my first climb: Antenna Hill in Angono, Rizal. It was around 30km from our house in San Mateo and around 400m above sea level.

Antenna Hill has two trails up to its peak, one from a private subdivision and one a more rugged trail. As pandemic bikers with relatively cheaper bikes, we decided to go through the subdivision entrance. After turning left, we were immediately met with a fairly steep climb—perhaps it had a 4% gradient. As it was fairly steep, it was also fairly short, but it was followed by another climb. And another one. We then reached what looked like an endless incline: a narrow road running through thickets on both sides.

My companion Kuya Jhek, who was a more experienced rider, went ahead. I followed with a “slowly but surely” mindset. After the long 7% gradient climb, however, I saw the road turning steeply to the right. Since I was already there, I just told myself I had to continue, like being born and living life: we’re here anyway so we might as well carry on.

Just as I was turning right, my wheels slipped a little; half of the road was covered with gravel and pebbles. I gasped, sucking in my soaking surgical mask, making it more difficult to breath. With a few maneuvers, I managed to reach the next slope.

As I was powering my way up, I finally saw a clearing at the end of the road. Two other bikers were there—both maskless—catching their breath. The view was behind them, but both were looking towards the left. What were they

looking at? There was apparently another steep climb on the left. When I reached the weary bikers, I finally decided to rest. Kuya Jhek was nowhere in sight. After jumping off my bike, I had to pull my wet mask off to catch my breath too. Never mind COVID; I just needed to breathe again. Ah, fresh air!

It was almost torture for me to attempt the climb at Antenna Hill. What was I thinking? And these two gentlemen beside me, what were they thinking? At that moment, I literally knew what the anti-natalists were talking about. Being born into suffering, why would anyone else want this life we are born into? We might as well save others from living, as we could have saved others from cycling.

Kuya Jhek came down soon after and checked on me. After a few moments of small talk, I then decided to start trying again. After two or three more steep climbs, we finally reached the top. There was a sign for a bikers' café. After what seemed to be a torturous climb, I really looked forward to eating somewhere nice.

The café had a half-built concrete structure that served as the counter, kitchen, and restroom. A chicken-wire fence blocks the view. Monobloc furniture were scattered all over. The face of a local politician was plastered on a tarpaulin hovering below the towering trees. "The food better be good," I thought. But the best dish I was able to order was just a rice meal with frozen chicken nuggets with a half-cold bottle of Gatorade. Ah, the satisfaction! All those suffering for what would have been a wonderful view blocked by a rusty wire fence and unmaintained shrubbery.

What's the point of undergoing such misery if it will only end up like this? The anti-natalists were indeed right; suffering (i.e., living) is futile. There's nothing to look forward to in the end.

Not losing hope, we thought we could pass by a nearby landmark just to wash off the disappointment. A few kilometers away are the famed Angono Petroglyphs. These petroglyphs were prehistoric carvings made by our ancestors, discovered by the late Botong Francisco—something to really look forward to that day.

Thinking it would be a downhill ride, we headed to the pinned location on Maps. We went and were surprised to find ourselves along the same highway going to Antenna Hill. We thought maybe we'd passed by the Petroglyphs before climbing and just didn't notice it.

As we followed the path laid down by Google, pedaling became harder and harder—*makunat na*. And that's not a good sign. As we went on, it became clear that it was not a downhill ride, but we were not prepared for what came next.

As houses became fewer and fewer, we were met with roads that got steeper and steeper. It became evident that it was not just a simple climb; it was another mountain altogether. The winding road was a nonstop climb with each bend hiding the next slope. The path was a series of ascending blind curves of *sikos* and *unli-ahons*.

The slopes were almost 45-degree angles without any chance for recovery. Although the climbs were continuous, I rested after each slope, making it harder for me to start over. The sheer pull of gravity made it harder to move forward. The climb was even made harder by the mandatory mask-wearing. With each try, my legs shook intensely with my bike halting several times. My heart was pumping out of my chest, primarily caused by fatigue and partly because of nervousness. For a while, I thought I was about to get a heat stroke. Was I nearing the end?

It was the most stupid way to die, I suppose—accidentally self-inflicting death. But isn't living an accidental self-infliction of death? We were all born accidentally. All birth is the inevitability of death. Hence, being born is merely an accidental infliction of death. Like biking, isn't living a death wish?

At one fateful stop, I came across a group of bikers: one was on his knees, one was rabidly drinking from his bottle, and one was sitting on the roadside. Kuya Jhek and I joined them, albeit remaining on our bikes to show a semblance of control. After a while, someone passed by walking, pushing his bike up while shouting, "*Bakit natin ginagawa sa sarili natin 'to?'*"

Why were we, in fact, doing that to ourselves? Why did we willfully go on that torturous ride? At that time though, what was the point of asking those questions? It's like Sisyphus asking the point of what he was doing; it would've helped no one.

I tried pedaling for one last time and I finally resolved to swallow my pride. I finally walked my bike up. They call it "11-speed," not because of the gears but because of the legs which apparently are two 1's. On 11-speed, I finally reached the top where Kuya Jhek was waiting for me. I saw a stretch of the sidewalk filled with bikers as exhausted as I was, drinking their water bottles out. In the middle of the road was a towering white fence with boom gates operated by uniformed guards. I then realized what could have been the most frightening thought of my life back then: being denied entry after what I could only describe as penitensya uphill.

We went to Angono Petroglyphs to make up for the underwhelming meal at Antenna Hill. It was, however, a mere reminder that with enough hope and grit, any disappointment could turn into bigger disappointments.

I could have died climbing that route, but I lived to tell the story of how futile that ride was. Such is the tale of existence: we ride through life because of accidentally being thrown into it. We make endless choices, entering many adventures only for them to end. And many of them do end end badly.

With our double whammy that day, one would think I would have stopped biking. I haven't.

My 62km that day became 80. And then 117. I still plan to go on exciting 200-kilometer rides with no 7-Eleven stores nearby. With no end in sight for the pandemic, all these succeeding rides have to be done with our masks on as if these climbs are not hard enough.

Where do I want to go? I don't really know, but I know that I will keep going. Why do I even want to go? I don't know either, but I am going anyway. Maybe life, like biking, is just like that: we go from one disappointing ride to another, sometimes finding satisfaction and oftentimes not. And yet we carry on looking for more places to discover only to get disappointed again. We go

on not because we have a purpose for being here, but because we are already here.

It may sound absurd, but it is in absurdity that life goes on. It might just be true that Sisyphus could be happy after all.