

## “Discovery”

The Polos discovered China in the thirteenth century. Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas in 1492. I discovered Tehran in 1999. Early one winter day that year, I missed the last and most pivotal question in my fifth grade classroom geography bee, resulting in my elimination. “Tehran is the capital of which nation?” Dumbstruck, I had blurt out the first exotic country to come to mind, “Kazakhstan.”

That afternoon, students were confined inside for the lunch hour due to rain. But I was itching to explore Asia and find this secret city of Tehran. Thus I headed to the all-mysterious reference section of the library.

I opened my first atlas that day. *The National Geographic Atlas of the World*, that great two-foot tall compendium of geographic knowledge, helped me learn more than just that Tehran was in the hills of north-central Iran. The maps seemed to come alive. I gazed in awe at the detail of the Persian countryside; I could imagine rickety fishing vessels trawling the Caspian, rusty oil pipelines snaking through the Zagros Mountains, and the serene harmony of hundreds of Muslims praying at the Great Mosque of Esfahan.

In discovering Tehran, I had found in myself an inner urge to explore. I turned the atlas from Tehran to Tippecanoe County. I could now appreciate, to some degree, the significance of 40° N and 87° W. I traced the Tippecanoe River as it emptied into the Wabash; the Wabash as it emptied into the Ohio; the Ohio as it emptied into the Mississippi; and the Mississippi as it emptied into the Gulf. I then traced my way back.

The following year, I won the classroom bee and advanced to the school finals. As the round progressed, eventually only two students remained; our slates were wiped clean, and we went to a best-of-three format. After three questions we were tied; only my correct answer of the “Red Sea” in double sudden death allowed me to take the title. A couple of months later I placed fourth at the state finals.

“Discovery” however, is as limited to the pages of an atlas as jazz is to the pages of sheet music. Miles Davis, the jazz virtuoso, concisely stated, “Don’t play what’s there, play what’s not there.” The inspiration drawn from the improvisational nature of jazz is likewise applicable to our everyday lives: true discovery is the active, not passive, acquirement of knowledge. Discovery comes not from reading a book or playing sheet music, but instead from venturing out of the norm and playing from the heart.

Three years later, in the fall of eighth grade, my friend Chris suggested that we go biking after school one Friday. With bright autumnal sun, cool temperatures, and brilliantly colored foliage the forecast for the day, I heartily agreed. I also had a location in mind—an outlying street just blocks from my home, Overlook Drive. I had just recently come to realize that, notwithstanding the sign “Ravinamy” next to the road, I did not know where the street went. That Friday we discovered the overlooked drive.

We found that Ravinamy was a secluded subdivision of about 50 modest homes. A veritable forest, opening only for the mouth of Overlook Drive, and a deep ravine hid Ravinamy from the main road. Chris and I entered Ravinamy, biked the length of Overlook Drive, and met a dead end. But there we noticed a thin trail continuing up through the woods. Onward we plodded until the trail ended roughly 200 yards later, in the backyard of a run-down home.

We had now come as far as was practical. Chris suggested we turn back, but I first walked around the home to read the road sign out front. This confirmed how far we had come; I could now gloat to my mother that we had biked out to SR 43. But as I was trekking back to the trail,

satisfied in my discovery of a new, short, though unfeasible route to SR 43 (my Northwest Passage, if you will), the owner of the home abruptly stopped me. I was about to apologize for trespassing when the old man asked if I was lost. He then asked unexpectedly: “Have you ever been to India?” Indeed, I had been there just the previous summer. Next he asked specifically about whether to Bombay. Yes again. “Oh, that’s wonderful! I haven’t seen the city in 50 years.”

I was flabbergasted. A bike ride down Overlook Drive had morphed into a Navy veteran’s reminiscence about a city he briefly visited but deeply loved. The Bombay of 1952 was both similar and different from that of 2002. The veteran described how parts of the city still seemed deserted after the painful partition of 1947. He marveled, though, at the city’s bustle—even the iconic double-decker buses would aggressively weave through downtown traffic, around plodding donkey carts and rickety rickshaws. He said that while in Bombay he had had his best time watching a cricket match in stately Brabourne Stadium. Though he didn’t understand the game, the veteran explained how he was carried away by the excitement of the spectators around him.

As the sun started to dip, I realized how much time had passed. Chris, who had also joined the conversation, and I thanked the man for his time and insights. Though I have not been back to Bombay since, watching a cricket match in Brabourne Stadium is high on my agenda of discovery.