ODYSSEY: THE LIFE AND CAREER OF A SENIOR CONSULTANT

I think the idea of the sabbatical came to me even before the bicycle trip did. I read a book by Lamar Alexander—who later became a United States Senator—called Six Months Off. He described his six years as governor of Tennessee and how during that time he gradually got more and more distant from his family without even being aware of it. He wrote that it finally hit him one day when he was sitting at dinner with his family and realized that all the children were facing his wife. He was a visitor at his own table. He decided right then that it was time to take a break, to reflect, to get reacquainted with his family.

When Walt Shill read Alexander’s book in 1993, he was in the process of being elected partner at the Tokyo office of a leading global consulting firm, the first American to do so. Shill was only 33 years old, yet the awareness of being disconnected from his family and his own health had begun to bother him. As a hardworking, energetic graduate of both Virginia Tech and the University of Virginia, his career in consulting in Japan and the Far East with his impending appointment as partner had seemed like a dream-come-true. But Alexander’s book and Shill’s growing awareness of his own situation worried him. Since graduating with his MBA eight years earlier, he’d gained seventy pounds and become increasingly married to his travel schedule. Now, on the verge of a career milestone that most viewed with eagerness, Shill was beginning to wonder if making partner was all there was in life.

Background

Shill’s parents met on a train; his father was a Navy recruit from a poor Mississippi family, and his mother was the daughter of a well-to-do family from Connecticut. They moved to Mississippi eventually, and Walter Shill was born in 1960—the eldest of what were to be six children. Shill’s father was “very task-oriented,” and created a household atmosphere that Shill saw as the source of his own industrious character.
While attending college at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), Shill made the football team as a walk-on. By November of his first semester, though, the demands of athletics were wreaking havoc on his grades, and since he wasn’t doing terribly well at football either, he decided to quit the team. The values Shill had developed in his youth made this a difficult decision:

I think that’s been in the back of my mind a long time. I . . . thought it was a smart thing to do . . . but it was very, very tough. I had somehow defined myself as “not being a quitter.”

Shill also met his future wife during his first year at Virginia Tech. They got married four years later, in 1979, and moved to Tennessee so that Shill could take a mill job with Alcoa as a mechanical engineer. His experience, upon arrival, typified in his own mind how he viewed and handled new undertakings and unfamiliar assignments throughout his career:

I was sure they’d made a hiring mistake. I was terrified that I was going to screw up and get fired. So, I went in with this fear, and just applied myself. We had three or four shutdowns a year and you’d prepare for them endlessly. And then for one week, they’d stop all the equipment and you’d go in and do all the maintenance. It was a very intense 24 hour effort, like an exam. And I found that if I applied myself I could get it all done. I got promoted relatively quickly, and after a couple years I started thinking, “Is this all there is?”

An assignment at Alcoa also introduced Shill to Asia Pacific. Shill was working with the main union in the plant, the United Steel Workers, to develop five-year targets for quality, cost, and other measures—only to find out three months later that a Japanese competitor had already beat those targets. This experience planted a strong desire in Shill to visit Japan and to figure out how they were able to do what they were doing. Soon after, Shill left Alcoa to get an MBA. He applied at several schools and decided to attend the Darden Graduate School of Business at the University of Virginia.

The Darden MBA Program

During the fall of 1983, Shill arrived at the Darden School to a familiar, creeping sense of dread:

Once again, I thought they’d made a mistake. I’ll never forget the first day, sitting in an auditorium, and I asked the woman next to me where she went to earn her undergraduate degree. “Princeton,” she said, “How about you?” “Uh, Virginia Tech,” I said, and quickly asked her where she’d worked. It was Goldman Sachs, on Wall Street. And I said, “Who’s that?” I’d never heard of them, didn’t know what an investment bank was or what an income statement
even was. When she asked me where I’d been, I told her it was a factory in Tennessee, and I began to think, “I’m in deep, deep trouble.”

To manage his concern, in a now typical pattern, Shill began working 80+ hour weeks. He earned excellent grades, including a scholarship, and managed to get a summer fellowship in Japan. This was his first trip outside the United States, and it left a deep mark on him:

That was a life-changing experience. I don’t think I slept that whole summer. I did everything you could possibly do in those ten weeks. And I just loved it; I was so enthralled with something that was so unique and so different.

As a result of his visit to Japan, Shill decided to enter the joint degree program in Asian Studies. This three-year program would give him two degrees, the MBA and an MA in Asian Studies and require him to spend six months in Japan doing research and working for a Japanese host company. This second, lengthier experience reinforced Shill’s fascination with Japan and Asia, so when it came time to find a permanent job after graduation, he knew that getting back to Japan would be part of his job-search strategy.

**Japan: Career and Family**

After graduation, Shill took a consulting job with McKinsey and Company, who promised him a position in Tokyo if he performed well at their Cleveland office. When Shill arrived in Cleveland, he felt the familiar pattern—a panicked sensation of being in over his head, followed by hard work, and good reviews. His two years in Cleveland also saw the birth of his first son. Holding to their commitment, McKinsey transferred Shill to Japan, and he and his family moved to Tokyo in 1989. About this time, Shill’s wife began to voice her concerns about his compulsive need to achieve:

She was getting sort of sick of this pattern of reaching for the stars, getting there and then having to prove that I belonged there. My first three or four years in Japan I was working 70, 80, 100-hour weeks. I worked at least one day during the weekend, and it was almost a vacation to go into the office in blue jeans and do what I wanted to do. There was always this idea of being partner versus not being partner...I can’t say that I wanted to be a partner so much as to prove that I could be.

As Shill’s position in the company grew, so did his family when a second son was born in Japan. Despite the new arrival, Shill’s weekly schedule left little time for family, exercise, and vacations. He was working hard, traveling frequently, and his lifestyle was taking a toll on his health. Shill gained seventy pounds over that four-year period and began to notice that he felt constantly fatigued and even faintly ill on a regular basis. He also started to feel increasingly dissociated from his family. Work and family were becoming ever more difficult to juggle.
Other events in Shill’s family life also had begun to cause him to think about “what’s really important in life,” as he put it. Shill and his wife had always wanted a girl, so they initiated a long series of events that would allow them to adopt a Japanese child. The stringency of the adoption screening process was, in Shill’s words, humbling and oddly revelatory. While working through the adoption process, he wondered more about his status in life and his condition and the role that family played. Then in the midst of this process, Shill’s mother passed away at the age of 65. His father had died prematurely at age 48 from cancer, so his mother’s passing was an event which prompted Shill to reflect further. In addition, serving as executor to his mother’s will, he was immersed in family management details and memories. Amazingly, their new infant daughter joined the Shill family about a week after his mother passed away:

Being the executor of the will forced me to deal with a lot of details in life that I don’t normally deal with. I’m used to multibillion-dollar mergers, not to keeping track of who gets the refrigerator. And the adoption process was very humbling. People come to your home and start asking questions: “Have you ever hit your wife? Do you hate your kids?” And again, I’m used to big business deals and I’m thinking, “None of your business.” But sorry, if you want to adopt, this is what you have to do. Those two experiences sort of foreshadowed the bike trip, making me say to myself, “You aren’t as important as you think.”

In the end, Shill’s hard work paid off: in the summer of 1993 when he became the first American to be elected partner at the McKinsey’s Tokyo office. He finally paid a visit to the family doctor:

I was 34 or 35, and the doctor said I was right on track: if I kept living this way I’d be dead in twenty years, if not sooner. I’d gained 70 pounds since I’d started at Darden, my resting heart rate was 85, my blood pressure was almost 260. Over the next months, something changed in me. My wife was a big part of it: she decided I should get a bicycle for Christmas. She said, “Look: now that you’ve made partner, I’m not going to hear any more about what you need to be. You need to do something other than work.”

As his wife’s words and his doctor’s warning sank in, Shill began to realize that “the allure of being an achiever at McKinsey was gone.” As he began to think about what he wanted to do with his life, the goal of getting fit came to the fore. Typically, he attacked this new goal with the same vigor he had every other objective in his life. He began getting up at 5:00 am to squeeze two hours of intense exercise into his daily routine. At first he rode an exercise bicycle, in part because he could do it without stressing his joints and also because he could monitor his heart rate. He bought a heart rate monitor and began reading intensively about heart rate, marathon training, diet, and recent scientific findings about the connection among all three. He was determined to utilize his exercise time to the best advantage by regulating his heart rate with research on the most benefit to be gained. Shill started riding the bicycle 10 miles in the
beginning and over two years worked up to 60 or 70 miles. On occasion, he postponed early morning meetings in order to complete his exercise; it had become a top priority.

The added time pressure of his new exercise regimen meant that on many nights he got only four hours of sleep—and yet he felt more productive on the job than he could ever remember. His resting heart rate fell; his performance ratings at McKinsey went up. In the meantime, Shill’s wife was eager to return to the United States so he began investigating the possibilities of moving back. And at some point during this period—the summer of 1995—the idea of riding a bicycle across the United States began to take shape in his mind. Shill created a two-part challenge for himself: first to test his growing physical fitness, and second to sort out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. In the end, the central activity he chose served both purposes. Shill decided to undertake a personal odyssey, alone, in the form of a coast-to-coast bicycle trip—a journey which Shill knew would require a vast improvement in his physical conditioning. To prepare, he planned a series of increasingly difficult training exercises for the summer of 1997. He ran a half-marathon, climbed Mt. Fuji, and rode his bike to the top of South Carolina’s Mount Mitchell and Maui's 10,000-foot Mt. Haleakala.

During this time, Shill’s eighteen-year marriage, what he described as a strong union between two very different people, began to take on a new dynamic:

I often think of myself as a kite, and her as the tension to hold me back. If she lets go, I’m gone, I crash. But I can climb higher and higher as long as there's some tension there. For her, I’m a sort of her alter ego: I’m able to get her to do things, like go to Japan that she would never have done otherwise. The problem is that I’m very disruptive to the home life she wants to create. And in a way I think moving back to the United States was a way to make amends for that. I was ready for more adventure, and for me it was really a struggle to move back to suburban America.

But in June of 1997, the Shills did just that. Shill took a position at McKinsey’s Washington, D.C., office, and the family moved into a home in Reston, Virginia. Smiling, he described the scene—a tidy suburban house with a minivan, ten minutes from his in-laws—and admitted, “It’s the antithesis of everything I would have wanted to do.”

The Sabbatical

Although Shill and his family moved to Virginia in June of 1997, he had negotiated delaying going back to work until January of 1998. Shill was no longer as certain of his plans for the future as he had been in earlier days, when a series of stepping-stones—get the first job, get the MBA, get the consulting position in Japan—had been clearly visible in front of him:

In the past, it was easy to just put another target out there and go after it. But after becoming partner it wasn’t so clear what that next target should be. That’s where
the sabbatical idea came from—and I didn’t call it a vacation. I felt like it should be some type of challenge.

As the summer of 1997 approached, Shill worked out the details of his bike trip with typical thoroughness. He had maps laid out county by county for the entire trip. He read voraciously accounts of other similar journeys. He planned to ride solo, both to eliminate dependence on others and in hopes of more easily meeting people along the way yet also to be alone with his thoughts about his life and his future. He planned to bring a tent and sleeping bag—so that he wouldn’t have to rely on roadside accommodations—a credit card for food purchases, some simple tools and not much else. On August 23, 1997, two and half months after moving to Virginia from Japan, Shill said goodbye to his family and boarded a plane for Seattle, feeling a deep ambivalence:

In the airport when my family saw me off, I remember turning, and walking away, and it felt like shit. I thought, “This is an incredibly selfish thing.” On the other hand, I was feeling free and physically light, almost naked. I had this little backpack on—I didn’t have my briefcase, no documents to prepare, no meeting to present at, no real schedule. It was an incredible feeling of independence and lightness.

The Transcontinental Odyssey

After arriving in Seattle, Shill hitched a ride northwest to the Olympic Peninsula in a dilapidated pickup with a seemingly “very unprofessional” bike mechanic named Steve. Shill, in his self-proclaimed “purist” thinking, wanted to make it truly transcontinental, so rather than starting from Seattle, he determined to begin at water’s edge as far west as the land stretched. He decided to keep a journal during the trip, from which we are able to quote. (All excerpts will be shown in italics.) His first entry taught Shill a lesson about apparent status in life that was to be repeated in various ways across the country:

Steve treats me to an exceptionally detailed tour and gives in-depth answers to everything from the history of the area to logging and salmon-fishing. I am impressed to learn that Steve reads 1-2 books a week and watches the Discovery Channel almost every night...I was very impressed with his knowledge and the breadth of his life. My earlier judgment fades and I chastise myself for my initial estimation of him as a person by the profession or job he has...I’m ashamed of how distorted my values have become over the years.

Steve dropped Shill off in a village called Neah Bay on the Olympic Peninsula, near the extreme northwestern tip of the Lower 48 states. That night Shill pitched his tent and climbed into his sleeping bag, but sleep would not come. He tossed and turned nervously until 4:30 in the morning. Finally he got up, ate, packed, and in order to start his journey “the right way,” began to ride west—toward Cape Flattery, seven miles away by dirt road, the very westernmost point
on the peninsula. At that moment the skies opened up in a downpour. It was not an auspicious 
beginning.

*I start pedaling but something is wrong...very wrong...it’s like I have no air in the 
tires...but I checked that...I feel like I’m pulling a 25-foot motor home...The dirt 
road is as bad as I could imagine: washboard, rocks, deep puddles and cars 
driving by...When I reach the platform looking west I get a picture taken and I am 
by myself...I look west and think of Japan...I have said hundreds of goodbyes, but 
somehow this one touches deeper...perhaps lack of sleep or perhaps an 
anticipation that this journey will somehow take me much farther from Japan.  

As Shill turned and headed east, he began to cry. The emotion surprised him—he did not 
think of himself as an emotional person—and he was glad there was rain falling to disguise his 
tears from passersby.

And then, another, more ominous surprise: his heart was racing. From a training rate of 
120 it had shot up to 160, which terrified him. For the first two days he could ride only 80 miles 
a day instead of the 100 he had planned on. On top of that, a phantom left-shoulder pain which 
had plagued him during training had returned with a vengeance. The fatigue, at least, was a 
symptom of nerves and sleeplessness, but soon he felt calmer and stronger, though the shoulder 
pain continued. His odyssey had begun:

*The scenery is astounding. Huge cedar trees line the road, 6 feet around, moss 
hanging from the trees and growing on the cedar roofs of the houses and even on 
the road. I am afraid to stop for fear of the moss growing on me.*

On day three, Shill hit an apparent obstacle in the town of Burlington, Washington, with 
the Cascade Mountains looming ahead. In the pouring rain, a tire went flat. The tire itself was 
badly gashed, and Shill had spare tubes but no spare tire. The one bike shop he could find was 
not an encouraging sight: a few old bicycles, no accessories on display, the shop empty save for 
the proprietor and his son:

*He begins looking at the tire but has no Presta valve adapter, patch kit, or Tuffy 
liner...a bad sign...I silently criticize him and his workshop and wonder if he is 
even competent. We put a patch on the inside of the tire and then I ask him if he 
knows how to adjust the front derailleur so I don’t drop the chain. He tries to 
adjust it and gets nowhere...then he says, “Whoa! Look at this...” I see that my 
right bottom bracket is screwed out 3/8 of an inch. For those who don’t cycle, 
this is the same as getting a flat fixed and someone finding that your transmission 
is falling out. I see him completely disassemble and reassemble the bottom 
bracket and I realize that this man is a first-rate machinist. He then explains, 
“You may have been having some problems with your shoulder or hips because of 
this, and it looks like it has been this way for at least six months.” At least three 
other mechanics looked at my bike before the trip and none saw it... I feel that my*
initial judgment of him was all wrong, and I am ashamed as he charges me $20. I head out, thankful for my flat.

Reflecting on the experience months later, Shill said, “That was the first time that the trip took on a different meaning. I was meeting someone for a purpose.” It was a realization that would strike him several times:

At a grocery store in Keller, Washington, I casually ask the cashier if there’s a place to camp nearby... At that moment a mountain of a man walks in with bib overalls, no shirt and numerous tattoos. She yells, “Hey Bob, where can this bike rider camp for the night?” My bowels loosen. He comes to the cash register with an 18-pack of beer and a bag of ice. He says, “I know just the spot—throw your bike in my truck and I’ll take you there.”

Riding out in the pickup with Bob, Shill began to worry about his safety and to wonder if he had been set up. When Bob dropped him at a beautiful campsite along his intended path and wished him well, Shill added another reassessment to his view of the world and the people in it.

The further Shill rode, the more he became convinced that the people he was meeting along the way were the real focus of his journey. Virtually every day, he said, someone told him or showed him something which seemed directly relevant to his own life. No one knew who he was or where he was from, and no one cared how much money he made. Gliding along the periphery of other people’s lives made him feel strangely anonymous. When he scaled the first of the mountain ranges it became clear that the trip he had envisioned—six weeks of single-handedly conquering the continent—had become something else entirely.

When I got to the top I didn’t feel like holding my hands up and saying, “Okay, I’ve done Logan Pass. Check it off the list. Now what’s next?” I didn’t feel that way about the mountains or where I was going, the way I have so many times in my life. It was a sense of accomplishment, but not of achievement or distinction.

I have never experienced such vast emptiness and open space. At times I can feel my mind being washed and cleansed by the space and wind... When I start early enough the silent stillness is so different from life in Tokyo that I cannot even imagine I was there... Did it happen?

From the Olympic Peninsula, Shill biked over the mountains and crossed the deserts of Washington State, cut across the Idaho panhandle into Montana, and crossed the Missouri River. Still worming his way through the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains, Shill found himself in the rugged hills of Belt Creek Canyon, a landscape of grueling climbs which left him parched. He stopped at a bar in a tiny town to slack his thirst:

I walk inside and it is so dark I cannot tell if anyone is there. The bartender is a worn-out man with tired eyes and gray matted hair and a deeply rutted face. He
gives me a long stare and raises his eyebrows but says nothing. I ask for water and he fills a glass with ice and squirts water in. I watch the TV in silence, and he fills the glass again when it is empty. As I finish I ask him how much, and he raises his hand palm up, looks down and shakes his head ever so slightly. I leave a dollar on the counter and walk out.

Belt Creek rushes through the old mining town of Monarch, Montana. Shill found himself there one evening, in front of an old shack where two young shirtless men sat drinking beer. A mongrel dog was chained to the porch. When Shill tried to skulk by, one of the men called out to him, and he readied himself for a confrontation. Instead, the two men greeted him with handshakes, asked him how far he’d gone that day and directed him to a rental cabin by the creek. “If you need anything, just call me,” one of them said, leaving Shill deeply touched and again, inwardly repentant.

It is early Sunday morning and I have the road to myself as I climb up Kings Pass (7,393 ft). I have two hours where I hear nothing but Belt Creek rushing down the mountain, my own breathing, and the tires on the road. I cannot count myself as a religious person but I will long remember this time as the closest I have ever been to a worship service.

At the top of the pass, Shill met another cyclist and his wife, who turned out to be wheat farmers from Great Falls. Almost automatically, Shill found himself asking if they were able to make a good living farming wheat. “I am doing what I love to do,” the husband replied. “I am not wealthy, but we consider ourselves very rich: a good family, time to bike and ski, and a great place to live. What else do I need?” Shill was unable to answer.

After the Rocky Mountains, Shill was surrounded by the flatlands of eastern Colorado. He needed a bike tube desperately—he was down to his last tube and it was patched in several places. Like a bicycler’s mirage, in a one-stoplight town, a bike shop suddenly appeared. Shill wondered if he could get real help in this isolated place, and he thought as he entered, “Why a bike shop in the middle of nowhere? How could they make a living here?” He was more surprised to see the proprietor was a middle-aged woman named Debbie:

It turned out she’d opened the bike shop six months before, and business was going quite well—and my consultant mind kicked in: How do you get enough throughput here, in this tiny town? She started telling me about the tourists, and I was sort of enjoying the whole thing. Finally I said, “What in the world prompted you to open a bike shop in this town?” And very matter-of-factly she said, “Well, eight months ago my eight- and eleven-year-old sons were killed by a drunk driver, and this is my healing place.” And it was like a sledgehammer. I don’t remember anything else she said. I don’t remember buying the tube or getting on my bike.
For the next six hours of empty highway, Shill had nothing to do but think about her words, and he credits that solitude for etching the experience so deeply in his memory. He rode on, weeping, deeply thankful for everything he had, but mostly for his own wife and family awaiting him in Virginia. The solitude, though had another side:

_There seems to be no sound lonelier than that of a passing car going the same way as I. It is strange. A car going the opposite way does not have the same effect. Perhaps it has something to do with the Doppler effect. Perhaps it is the feeling of being passed by, a conversation that could not happen or someone going home and getting there weeks before you get to yours. I get bored and lonely enough at times to wave at all oncoming cars just so they will wave back._

More conversations did happen as Shill neared the eastern border of Colorado, and by now he knew better than to try to judge the stranger in advance or to predict what would transpire:

_An old man in his late sixties or early seventies comes up to me. His face has been deeply etched by the weather and he has a growth of some kind over his left eye. His hat is a faded, frayed, and dirty white cowboy hat. His orange windbreaker has not seen a washer in years and his jeans should have been in the Levi’s museum. He comes up to me close and says in a loud voice, “I’ve been listening to you talk about this trip… call it what it is, son!” What do you mean? “This trip of yours— call it what it is! All this talk of living in Japan— call it what it is! Pure damn foolishness!” I am not quite sure what to say, and I am growing afraid of what might happen next. There is a long pause and then he says, “Make sure you enjoy it and be careful.” He leaves. A few minutes later I get up and as I start to pay my bill the waitress says, “Hank’s done taken care of it.”_

As the Rocky Mountains disappeared beneath the western horizon, the completion of the trip—a goal he’d harbored for several years—took on the feel of certainty. With it came a still older and more unwelcome thought: “What do I do next?” Shill felt a wave of confusion and guilt and anger as his old mind-set returned, his natural tendency for looking automatically ahead for the next mountain to climb.

The cornfields of the Midwest provided an unlikely respite. With nothing to do for three weeks but pedal across a table-flat landscape, Shill got to thinking:

_I decided that maybe there is not another mountain. And maybe there shouldn’t be another mountain in life. And I could smell the corn and smell the cows and meet more people, and somehow shift my focus away from getting over the mountain to what was going on around me, which was nice._

_The generosity continues to shock me. Nina offers for me to take her car so I can get a decent dinner. Jim stops and buys me a cup of coffee to drink while I clean_
and adjust my bike. I am afraid either I have been too busy to experience such generosity or I have been in the wrong places.

At one point, Shill lost his wallet. He had just checked into his occasional motel stay and realized that he didn’t have it with him. He thought immediately of the hassle with trying to make the calls to cancel the credit cards, of trying to figure out how to get food, of how disconnected and vulnerable the loss would make him—and of the loss of his journal. The office then called him and let him know that someone had found the wallet in the parking lot and had turned it in. Shill was exhausted and must have dropped it while walking his bike to his room:

...I have just returned from the motel office to pick up my wallet. My wallet was turned in to the front office 15 minutes before by Phil...it contains everything...money, credit cards, ID. I could not even buy dinner without it...but much more importantly it contains my journal...irreplaceable. As I walk back to my room this big guy walks straight toward me in the parking lot. I get nervous and he introduces himself as Phil. If you saw Phil walking down the street in D.C., New York, or Chicago you would lock your car door. He is easily 300 pounds, a face not even his mother could love and clothes that suggest the Salvation Army is running low on donations. I reach out to give him a twenty and he indignantly refuses. He speaks quickly and confidently... “You reap what you sow; I just hope that someone would do the same for me someday.”

Winding Down

Shill had long since convinced himself that finishing would not be a problem, and as he worked his way through the boredom of doing what he knew he could, he found he was able to focus more and more completely on the journey itself. Physically, he recalls, he “turned into a machine,” upping his pace to 120 miles a day, and even managing two consecutive days of 150 miles—the equivalent, in calorie expenditure, of back-to-back marathons. His immersion in the task at hand reached frightening depths: at one point, he literally woke up pedaling, with no idea where he was or where the last four hours had gone.

With 3,800 miles of road and six weeks of time behind him, Shill was now on familiar territory: a fifty-mile trail leading into Washington which he’d ridden numerous times the previous summer during his training. Surrounded by weekend cyclists, he fit right in. His eldest son even rode out to meet him, and they covered the last five miles together. Shill recalls the unexpected emotions he felt at the end of the road:

I’d always felt that I would get to the end and feel this triumphant feeling: “It’s over.” I didn’t feel that way at all. It wasn’t a letdown, but there wasn’t this sense of accomplishment—it was like the journey was continuing, and this was another stop. It’s almost as if I’m still on it. I’m not pedaling any more, but I’m still on a journey.
Where Next?

Shill was still deciding where that journey would take him next. For the time being, at least, he was on familiar ground: consulting at McKinsey’s Washington, D.C., office. As he was about to begin his new assignment, Shill thought about many things. With his new job came the danger—underscored by the thoughts he fought off near the end of the bike trip—that he would lapse back into the workaholic mind-set which had jeopardized his health. Given his pattern of feeling overwhelmed with new assignments and his method of dealing with it by working harder than most, Shill was well aware of this possibility. A few days before the start of his new job, thinking by analogy of his training regimen from the year before, he mused on a possible solution:

When I was training, I often would watch my heart-rate monitor, and push myself to get so many minutes in certain heart-rate zones. Then, there were other times when I wouldn’t watch it, and I’d tell myself I was going to work at 90 percent instead. I wouldn’t push myself to the limit. And afterwards I’d find out I’d actually spent more time in the higher zones, when I thought I was doing 90 percent. So there seems to be this area where I can accomplish more with far less pain and sacrifice, and that’s what I want to do. Can I do it? I don’t know.

With the memory of Debbie, the bereaved Colorado bike-shop owner ingrained in his mind, Shill put a face on the sacrifice that pushing himself to the limit entailed: less time spent with his family. He said he was determined to rearrange those priorities. Part of his new work as a partner at McKinsey involved mentoring younger coworkers, and Shill found himself including this newfound perspective in his advice to them:

I tell them that the partner track at McKinsey is like a pie-eating contest. And if you win, the prize is more pie. So it’s not what you think it is. I try to tell them, “Find something like bicycling that you really love and see if you can share it with your family somehow.”

Shill said he was more able to see the symptoms of a workaholic in others because he had come to see them in himself and that perhaps also he had become more able to perceive his career through the eyes of his wife. To her his professional achievements to date had been like a series of hurdles, and not all of them had been worth jumping over. Yet, Shill had no regrets: he believed that only by enduring all the pain of their dislocations and family-life strain had he grown sufficiently as a person to fully understand and embrace her point of view.

Shill continued to wonder about what the future might hold, and while he acknowledged that the immediate days ahead would be spent at McKinsey, the years ahead were less easily discerned. He borrowed his wife’s favorite metaphor in talking about the future course of his career and revealed the influence of her values too:
Two to three years from now at McKinsey there’s yet another hurdle, of being a director or not being a director. And I’ll either make that or not make it. Maybe I can prove this wrong, but I think it’s going to require a level of effort and a level of time that I don’t think I want to commit to. What I’ve decided to do is try McKinsey on my terms. If they keep me, great—because McKinsey would be a great place to stay—and if they don’t keep me, then I shouldn’t be there.

Shill saw a number of diverging career paths. The dream of owning his own business, which he had harbored since his Darden days, still held a certain appeal. He thought of combining teaching and consulting in some way, and the notion of starting his own consulting company also occurred to him. But here the central—and unexpected—revelation of his bicycle journey made its presence felt, as Shill frankly admitted that he no longer felt the way he once did about the consulting business.

I worry a little bit about the values of consulting. Most people in most businesses, in fact, take on a set of values that they judge other people by, and I don’t agree with them any more. I think that’s probably the biggest change of the trip. Maybe you’re required to do it to be successful, because you do have to judge people and make quick decisions and relatively rash judgments with little information. What I’ve realized is that that may work in business, but for individuals, it’s a big mistake.

At the end of his bicycle odyssey, Shill still wondered about where his path would take him next:

*I worry that I will fit right back in...that the lessons learned and the experiences gained will be shoved aside by the rush and pace of suburban life and professional imperative. How can I preserve this sense of journey—of exploring, seeing, smelling, and sensing the world around me? Can I remember how useless the stereotypes were and how ashamed of my judgments I was? Can I continue to smell the corn and cows? Can I taste again that pure, sweet air of the high Rockies? Can I ride in my mind once again up Belt Creek on that serene Sunday morning? Can I remember and feel for Debbie and her courage and her healing?*