

Cycles

By
Eric Kay
June, 1993

The world runs in cycles, from the sun to the sea.
Running like a massive clock, for all eternity.
We, the people of the earth, feel this repetition.
We struggle with it everyday, in our hours of indecision.
We are selfish to think we have any bearing, on the earth, the sky, the sea.
For it is this globe that is ever-present, not us, for eternity.

On Chimney Hill, Baxter lay on his back, peering through half closed eyes at the warm blue of the summer sky. He took a deep breath as the gentle breeze sang quietly to him. Above him loomed the cylinder-like rock formation that gave the hill its name. The hill rose from below like an island in a sea of grass and wheat. Its sides were too steep to cultivate. A young hawk traced lazy circles above, before landing on the chimney. In the distance, Baxter could see his village and scattered livestock.

Baxter often came to the chimney to think and enjoy the peace it offered. He had always known such peace. Others his age wanted to play war games or tumble roughly in the tall grass. Baxter, however, only wanted to relax, and think. He ran his fingers through his long blond hair.

Sometimes he thought about the peace, but usually he simply thought about whatever would surface in the expanse of his mind: stories, his friends, his folks, his life, his future, or more and more, his girlfriend.

He had known about Tawny for the two years she had lived in the village. Recently, however, he never missed a chance to be around her. To the best of his knowledge, she did not even know his name, although he knew everything about her. He was hopeful.

Suddenly, Baxter's thoughts were interrupted.

"What'a ya doin', lazy?"

"Just thinkin'," replied Baxter.

"Good, move over."

With that, Schroeder sat next to Baxter on the small hill overlooking the countryside. Soon, both were lost in thought. The two boys had been friends for as long as they could remember. They often walked through the grass together or sat and talked under the chimney.

Both boys were thoughtful, much more so than others their age. Life was not easy for either of them and both turned inward because of it.

After quite a while, Baxter finally spoke again. "Schroeder, do you ever think about the wars and pollution and stuff?"

"Yeah, sometimes. It must have been rough, but I think they deserved what they got. Anybody who can abuse such a beautiful thing like this has to be nuts," Schroeder said, as he motioned to the countryside. "There were too many people and not enough of them cared."

"I guess," Baxter said, "but do you think it'll ever happen again, like to us, these days?"

Schroeder took a minute to answer, "Nah, I think we learned from it, so we won't let it happen again," replied Schroeder. "Anyway, since the wars, most of the stuff that did all the polluting is gone. The factories and those car-things are all gone. I think people just realized that we could live without it all."

"It makes ya wonder if they knew the damage they were doing at the time. Like you said, 'too many people, not enough cared,'" Baxter replied.

"You worry too much. Anyway, the only things you care about are Tawney's legs," Schroeder said with a wry grin, turning the conversation light again.

"Oh, yes!"

Baxter enjoyed the view awhile longer before speaking again, "We better get home, it's almost dinner time."

The next day, Schroeder found Baxter in the same place, sitting quietly by himself. He sat by his friend, yet it was several minutes before Baxter realized Schroeder's tears.

"What's wrong?" Baxter asked.

"My dad, again."

That was enough said. Baxter knew about Schroeder's dad's temper. Most of the town did. Schroeder had a large family and his father worked them all very hard; even the girls were responsible for working in the fields while the sun was in the sky. At night, the house and livestock were cared for.

Schroeder did not mind the work, but he was the runt of the family and received a great deal of abuse because of it. The other kids would take out their frustrations on Schroeder and then his father would beat him for being too soft.

"I don't know how much more I can take, Baxter," Schroeder said between sobs. "I guess I really am soft."

"Schroeder, you're one of the toughest kids I know. You just have a rough way to go, that's all," Baxter said consolingly, just now noticing his friend's bruised eye. "At least you have a family. You're the only person I have to talk to really. You're more like a brother."

"You're like a brother to me too. As a matter of fact, you're the only brother I have who treats me like a brother and not a punching bag," Schroeder said, wiping the last of the tears from his eyes, his mouth a tight line.

The two boys sat silently. Then Schroeder spoke up. "I really want to get him."

"Who?" asked Baxter.

"My old man. I want to just kill him," Schroeder said quietly. "Just string him up. Let him suffer some too."

"Then where would you be? Just in trouble. Your brothers would really kick your butt then. No, what you need to do is tick him off without getting hurt yourself."

With that, both boys were lost in thought again. Baxter finally spoke up. "I got it! You could pretend you were sick and couldn't work anymore. Then he couldn't pick on you. Then your brothers and him would have to work harder in the fields," Baxter spouted.

"You don't get it, do you? It doesn't matter if I'm sick or not, he'd still work me. What I need to do is just leave. That way he'd lose me in the fields for good."

Baxter did not see Schroeder for almost a week. Then, late one night after Baxter and his grandparents had long since gone to bed, Baxter awoke to a tapping at his window. It was Schroeder.

"Get in here before you freeze to death," Baxter said in a whisper. Schroeder climbed through the small window.

Once inside, Baxter lit a candle and sat on the bed. Schroeder began pacing in the shadows, thinking before explaining himself. "I'm leaving and I want you to go with me."

Baxter sat stunned. "You're what?"

"I'm leaving. I can't live at home anymore. I think he wants to kill me too, so I'm getting out," Schroeder said. "I can't do it alone and you're the only one I know I can trust. Come with me." Schroeder threw the last line out as half plea, half question.

Again, Baxter sat thinking. He really didn't have anything keeping him here. His grandparents were old and he roamed the countryside alone, or with Schroeder, most of the time. It probably would be days before they missed him anyway. His best-friend needed him and the

idea of striking out on their own was kind of exciting. He looked at Schroeder, who had just moved into the small ring of candle light. The weak light shone in his black hair, and his other eye was now swelling. Baxter began searching under his bed.

"What are you doing?" asked Schroeder.

"Packing."

"I'm glad you're coming with me," said Schroeder.

"Why? Because you forgot to bring food, matches, and a bed roll, and I brought enough for two?" Baxter said with a smile.

"No," Schroeder said a little too seriously. "I've been living with those people called my family for years, and I can't ever remember not feeling lonely, except when you and I were hanging-out together. You really are my brother."

"Hey, cut the sappy stuff out and walk faster. We better be well out of this valley before sun-up or your dear old dad will find us."

Noticeably more at ease as the sun came up, both boys laughed and joked as they found a small wooded glen well off the road. They made camp and ate. Once their appetites were abated, the boys stretched out in the early morning sun.

"I really feel at peace now. This just feels so right," Schroeder stated.

"I know what you mean. Like we should have done this years ago," Baxter replied. Both boys then fell silently head-long into thought.

"Baxter, are you asleep?" asked Schroeder.

"No, just thinking," replied Baxter. "Why?"

"I was thinking too. Mainly about what we were talking about the other day, up on Chimney Hill. About the peace and all."

"What about it?" Baxter asked his friend.

"I dunno. I was wondering if all those problems could happen again. Back then they had big governments and stuff and it still happened. The villages only have elders, now. What would stop it all from happening again? It's kind of scary, ya know. I know I said I thought it wouldn't happen again, but now that I think about it, I'm not so sure," Schroeder said.

"You worry too much," Baxter told him, but many times before on Chimney Hill, Baxter had wondered about the same thing. It all seemed too fragile. It all seemed too good to last for long.

The peace had lasted their entire life time, longer. The village elders could only remember hearing stories about the wars and the pollution and the abuse the earth had absorbed. It had taken many years for the world to repair itself. Even now, dangerous places still haunted the countryside. People must not have cared then. Baxter wasn't too sure how many cared today. Most probably would just as soon forget the chemicals and fighting and the big governments. It had taken many years for the people to repair themselves, as well, not only in numbers but in spirit.

Schroeder had a good point. What would or could stop it all from happening again? Before Baxter could ponder that question he was sound asleep in the warm morning sun.

"Schroeder, you can read, can't ya?" Baxter asked.

"You bet. That was about the only escape I could find sometimes at home. My mom had some really old books, most with paper covers and stuff. Most of 'em were pretty good stories. Why?" Schroeder enquired.

"I can read a little but my grandfolks never really thought it was that important. How come you never told me about those stories before?"

Schroeder stopped folding his bed roll and said, "I don't know. I guess we always had something else to talk about and I always put home and reading in the same pin. When we were together I didn't like to think much about home. I guess you could say you were good escape for me too," Schroeder said.

"Especially now," Baxter said with a big smile. Schroeder laughed.

"Why did you want to know if I could read in the first place?" Schroeder asked.

"I was thinking about religion, and I was wondering if you had ever read the Bible," Baxter said.

"We didn't have one, why?" Schroeder asked.

"No reason. I was just wondering. The Bible was about the only thing I ever read. It was the book I learned to read on," Baxter said.

By the next evening, the boys were further away from home than they had ever been. It did not seem to bother them, however. The conversation, as well as the joking and laughing, continued in earnest. After a late dinner the boys would rest, rise early, then nap during the heat of the day. The sun was still too hot to walk under when at its zenith.

Since before the wars, the sun had begun to grow hotter. At first, crops had suffered and cancer increased, but people learned to adapt. Now, the sun only grew too hot during the middle of the day, so again, people adapted.

That night, after eating some salted pork and bread, the conversation began again in earnest.

"Tell me about the Bible, Baxter," Schroeder asked his friend.

"It's been a long time since I read any of it, so I don't remember much. It had some great stories." He thought for a moment before continuing. "There was this one about a guy named Noah. God tells him to build this huge boat and put his family and two of every kind of animal on it. See, God said that most of the people were too mean and sinning too much.

"So, God makes it rain for like forty or fifty days, and everything on the earth drowns except Noah and his kids, and the animals. Then, God dries everything up and Noah and his family let the animals out and life goes back to normal again.

"I remember that story 'cause I think it's like us. After the wars and all the abuse the Earth has taken, there was nothing left but a few people and animals, and I guess God kinda healed it and let us start over," Baxter finished. He looked over at Schroeder who was staring at him. "What?"

"That was pretty intense. Are all the stories in it like that one? What else do you remember?" Schroeder asked enthusiastically.

"Not much. It told about how God had made the world and about all this history and stuff. Like who the kings and rulers were then and about the Jews and stuff," Baxter continued.

"Who were they?"

"They were like the people God picked to be his favorites," Baxter said.

"What happened to 'em?" Schroeder asked.

"I don't remember much. They followed this guy into the desert and worshiped cows or something," Baxter replied.

"What other stories did it tell?"

"I don't remember much more. Toward the middle, (I never got that far, my grandma used to read it to me,) it tells about this guy named Jesus. He was the Messiah, or something like that. He was really powerful and could walk on water and stuff. He said that the meek would inherit the earth," Baxter said.

"I guess we're the meek, huh?" Schroeder asked, but Baxter did not reply.

As the sun began to ignite the clouds with pink flame, the boys spotted the thick cooking-smoke from a small town. They had not known that it even existed and were eager to get to it before the sun grew too hot and slowed their journey.

Sweaty and tired, just before noon, the boys entered the town. It was far larger than their tiny village and it took both boys by surprise. Multi-level buildings blocked the horizon all around.

Upon entering the town, the boys found themselves in a large open market. Carts carrying food, cloth, dry goods, weapons, boots and countless other items were starting to close for the heat of the day. People were moving in, out of the sun, and Baxter and Schroeder thought it wise to follow.

They made their way into the square and found an inn at its far corner. The inn was teeming with people and the boys quietly slipped in and took a seat in the corner. Soon a large woman with few teeth and well displayed bosoms approached and asked if they wanted food or drink.

"Well, we don't have much to give. How much is your cheapest drink?" Baxter asked.

"It'll cost ya a copper for each, cutey," she whined.

"Okay, two please," Baxter requested, producing the needed coins.

The woman left and soon returned with two tall mugs of watered-down cider. She placed them on the table, took the money, waited another moment, then turned sharply and walked away.

The boys watched the people in awe. They had never seen so many people in one place at one time. This one room contained twice as many people as their entire village.

Several men at the other end of their table were engaged in some type of game. Two small cubes with dots were being rolled and a great deal of money was exchanging hands. The gentlemen asked if the boys wanted to play, but both declined the invitation quickly. The men laughed and returned to their game.

Schroeder turned to Baxter. "How much money do you have?" he whispered.

"I have about twenty bits of copper. How much do you have?" Baxter asked.

"I have about as much and one chunk of silver. I stole it from my father," Schroeder said with a smile.

"You shouldn't have done that, but I'm kinda glad you did. We may need it," Baxter said.

"Just what I was thinking," Schroeder said.

They went back to sipping their drinks and watching the people. They saw a young girl dressed in the same fashion as the waitress, approach table after table of men. The boys assumed she was also a waitress until she approached their table and sat between Schroeder and the gambling men. She turned first to Schroeder.

"Hi there. Are you gentlemen looking for some satisfaction?" she inquired with a slow smile, eyeing both boys, up and down.

"I'm sorry ma'am but I don't understand," Schroeder said as she tousled his hair.

"You know. I'm willing to take care of you, for a price, of course," she continued.

"Ahh, of course," Schroeder stammered, trying to smile and pretend that he knew what was going on.

Suddenly, one of the men from the other side of the table, grabbed the girl around the waist, pulled her to him and kissed her protruding breasts. Schroeder and Baxter almost jumped at him until they realized, simultaneously, that the girl was giggling. The man handed some of his winnings to the girl and her giggling turned to laughter. Soon after, the couple got up from the table. The girl winked at the boys as she walked by, and the couple disappeared through a small doorway at the other end of the room.

The boys looked at each other in wonderment. One of the men still playing looked at the boys and asked, "You fellas so green, ya ain't never seen a whore before?"

The boys didn't know what to say. The men just laughed. "I'm ready when you are," Schroeder said quietly to Baxter. With that, both quickly finished the last of their cider and left.

The day was now slowly turning into evening and the air was beginning to cool. The boys walked down the street in silence.

"Do you know what a whore is?" Schroeder asked Baxter.

"No, do you?" Baxter replied.

"Yeah, my older brothers used to talk about them. They're women who will have sex with you if you pay them money. I thought my brothers were just putting me on or making fun of me. I had no idea people really did that sorta thing. Wow," Schroeder finished.

"You're not thinking about going back and spending that silver piece are you?" Baxter asked.

"No way. Even if it would have dawned on me what she was talking about in there, I wouldn't have left with her," Schroeder said. "That's gross."

"Sex or paying for it?" Baxter asked Schroeder.

"Paying for it, or having it with a woman who would do it with the highest bidder. When I do it, I want it to be with the woman I'm going to marry," Schroeder said.

"I know what you mean. I always figured Tawny would be my first. I guess I can start looking elsewhere now," Baxter said. Schroeder smiled at his friend, and pushed his shoulder. They continued down the street in silence.

They walked around for several hours, both almost afraid to go into another inn. The town was mostly stone buildings. There were shops and warehouses and several other markets. Most of the streets were paved or cobbled. People came out of everywhere.

The boys witnessed several bloody fights. A small gang of boys, about their age, followed another such gang between buildings. A brutal fight ensued. Schroeder and Baxter felt the fight was going to spill into the street so they watched as long as they felt safe, then moved on.

They also watched a young boy remove a large man's purse while the man looked over a table of ornate carvings. Thin dogs lined the alleys behind restaurants, searching for scrapes.

The boys saw several other prostitutes, as best they could tell. They also saw people with, seemingly, no place to go. Tired old people who looked as if they owned nothing, roamed the streets. Raged men would almost assault them for a coin or two.

Feeling sorry for a small barefoot boy, Baxter gave him a coin. Within minutes a throng had gathered and began chasing the boys. Baxter and Schroeder ran through the streets, quickly lost. Before they knew it they had run into an ancient part of the city. In their hurry to escape, the boys had inadvertently run past the ancient sign that still read, "TOXIC AREA: DO NOT ENTER."

"I think we lost 'em," Schroeder said, out of breath, hands on knees.

"I think so too. Look, there's some woods up there. Maybe we can camp there for the night," Baxter suggested, pointing up a small hill.

The sun was now fully set. The boys walked up the hill and past large skeletal structures of stone and rusted steel. After the excitement of the chase, the boys just found a good camping spot and collapsed.

Throughout the night, the boys heard strange noises, scurrying, limbs cracking and an occasional howl or hoot. They slept poorly and woke before sunrise, exhausted. Baxter got up and rubbed his sandy eyes. "I'm gonna go take a leak. I'll try to find some firewood if you'll set up camp. I'm starving," he said to Schroeder as he turned and went into the woods.

He returned after several minutes, panting and pale. "What happened to you?" Schroeder inquired.

"There's something strange going on around here. I think I just saw a dead body in the woods," he said with wild eyes. "This whole area is like nothing I ever seen."

"Look Baxter, we've both had our share of excitement for a while. There's enough scrub-wood right around here for a small cook-fire. Let's just eat and see what the morning light brings," Schroeder said to his friend, trying to stay calm himself. Baxter sat down and let Schroeder gather some firewood.

As the sun began to rise, the boys witnessed strange and haunting things all about their camp. Skeletons of small, and a few large, animals were all that inhabited the hill. Baxter figured that was what he had seen.

For some unseen reason, an eerie feeling crept over the boys. The aged area seemed permeated with something that caused chills to run through the boys. It was an old wind that seemed to have been blowing for ages unknown. It spoke of those lost and forgotten.

Large concrete and steel structures, half intact, dotted the area around the hill. One in particular stood at least ten stories high. All about the buildings lay debris: barrels, large rusted objects with small windows and wheels, and chunks of rubble. Though it was mid-summer, the few trees that were scattered about looked dead.

"Baxter, where in the world are we?" Schroeder asked in a whisper, as if speaking aloud would wake the dead.

"The only thing I can think of is this is all from before the wars, but if that's true just think how old this stuff is," Baxter said in amazement.

"Wanna look around?" Schroeder anxiously asked Baxter.

"Yea, I guess. Do you want to see the body?" Baxter replied a bit nervously.

"Not really. It was probably a coyote or something anyway. Let's just look around down there."

The boys gathered up their gear and walked down the hill. They began to investigate the vehicles first.

"I wonder what these are," Baxter said.

"I don't know but they look kinda neat. Hey, check this out. I can open this one," Schroeder almost shouted.

Baxter came over to his friend who was climbing into one of the cars. The seats were eaten away and most of the windshield and dashboard were cracked.

"I wonder what a Cadillac is," Baxter said.

"Why?"

Baxter pointed to the side of the car and said, "See here, it says Cadillac, and something else I can't read."

"That must have been the name of the guy who lived in it," Schroeder said.

"I don't know. I think it's some kind of carriage, Schroeder. See, it has wheels and I bet they turn if you move that," Baxter said pointing to the steering wheel.

Schroeder turned the wheel with a great deal of difficulty, and the front tires began to turn.

"Wow, that's cool!" Schroeder said.

"Let's look in the buildings," Baxter said.

"Okay"

The boys looked around briefly at the other cars then went into the nearest building. Most of its four floors were intact. The front door opened slowly. The boys were amazed at the large amount of rust on most of the things they saw.

The door opened into a cavernous room that contained a large desk at one end and several small tables, chairs and sofas. Over the desk were the words, HAMILTON HALL. There were two tall, handleless doors at the far end of the room that the boys could not open and a smaller door that opened easily, revealing a stairwell.

The boys went up the stairs to the next floor. A long corridor with many doors on each side grew ahead of them.

"This is kinda creepy, huh?" Baxter said to Schroeder. Schroeder nodded and swallowed hard.

The boys found themselves walking very quietly as if they would wake the occupants of the rooms. They tried all the doors in the hall but all were locked.

"Let's get out of here and try another building. I don't mind exploring, but all these rooms are locked," Schroeder said, trying not to sound nervous.

"Okay."

The boys left the dormitory and went next to a low, sprawling building. The boys wondered over its cornerstone that read, "Erected 1998-Webster Public Library."

"What's a lib-r-ary?" Schroeder asked Baxter, trying the new word out.

Baxter shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know, but I do know that, 'public,' means anybody can go in."

They simply climbed through the door's window, which had been smashed out.

The boys then saw an incredible sight. Thousands of books, neatly arranged on shelves were spread-out before them. They first stared at each other, then at the room. The entire room was filled with shelves of books, all covered in a thick layer of red dust.

"Why would anybody collect so many books?" Schroeder asked Baxter.

"Let's find out," Baxter said as he began thumbing through the nearest set of volumes. "This is incredible. I wonder if anybody even knows it's here."

"Hey, wait a minute, we're not that far from town. Why wouldn't anybody come up here from town and check this out?" Schroeder asked his friend.

"I don't know, but I firmly believe in the 'gift horse' theory. Don't look one in the mouth," Baxter said as he continued looking through a book.

Schroeder wasn't really sure what Baxter meant, but he let it drop. "Maybe none of them knows how to read," he said absently. He had already fallen under the spell of a huge picture book about animals.

The boys first realized that it was growing dark outside when they started having trouble reading. They quickly went outside, found a night's firewood, brought it inside the library and set up camp. They found a couple of old sofas the mice hadn't gotten around to, to lay on, and continued reading and looking through books by firelight. The fire sounded like a furnace once it caught.

"Wow, I didn't realize how quiet it was until the wood started popping," Schroeder said to Baxter, who was still lost in a thick history book called *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Both boys fell asleep late in the night, waking early to continue. Periodically, one would call the other over to show off a picture or ask if the other understood something. Baxter was the first to find a dictionary and discover its use. Schroeder found the card-catalog first but neither could figure what purpose it served. It became firewood. Baxter also found a Bible and gave it to Schroeder to read. READ WHAT???????SODOM AND GAMORA

The process they had gone through the night before soon became a ritual, and reading soon became a passion. Both boys would get light-headed before realizing that they had not eaten for hours. After they ate, stretched, and stoked the fire, their noses went back into a book.

"Hey, listen to this," Schroeder called to Baxter. "It says here that back in the 1970's, that's long before this place was even built, there was this place called Love Canal. Some of the big companies had been dumping stuff into the water and stuff and it made the people get really sick. Check out these pictures. Those look like babies!" He turned the book and they both gazed in horror at the photographs of deformed infants and small children.

"God, why would they do something like that?"

They both swallowed hard and went back to their respective books. Before long, Schroeder tossed the book into the fire in disgust, and picked up another from a nearby pile.

"Wow, you thought that was wild, check this out. It says here that during the 1990's, while this place was being built, almost thirty kids our age were killed a week by guns. I looked up "guns" in the dictionary and it said they were, "any portable firearm" like a rifle, shotgun or

pistol. I remembered a book I saw yesterday," Baxter said as he rummaged through a deep pile of books. "Here it is, check these out." He showed his friend the pictures and the damage they could do.

Schroeder sat back, lost in thought for a moment, before saying, "It doesn't paint a friendly picture of the past does it? They must have all hated each other, especially the kids. I wonder why?"

"Beats me," was all Baxter could say, still studying the pictures.

FUNNY BOOK-IRONY-NOT SO DEPRESSING

BOOK on REINCARNATION/BIBLE?

Late one night Baxter and Schroeder began to discuss the growing lack of food in their packs. They would need to go into town and purchase more soon. They made their fire and settled to its warmth.

The next morning both boys had a fever and felt very weak.

"I feel horrible," stated Baxter.

"Me too," replied his friend.

"How much food do we have left?" Baxter asked.

"Not much. Probably only enough for a day or two more," Schroeder said. "Why?"

"Well, one of us is going to have to make it into town. I don't think I can make it. Can you?"

"I can try," Schroeder said as he began to stand. By the time he made it to the door, Baxter was vomiting over the side of his sofa. Schroeder knew he had to make it to town. Not for food, but for help.

He concentrated his strength and slipped through the door window. Schroeder made his way through the cars toward town.

Baxter rolled from his sofa, found his travel blanket in his pack and rolled up in it. He then took an arm load of wood from the pile and tossed it on the coals. By the time it caught flame his cold spell had passed, and he was burning with fever again. He fell asleep.

He didn't know how long he had been out, but he felt strangely peaceful when he woke. Baxter spoke aloud to the books as he wiped the sweat from his brow, "You know, I've learned more since I've been here than I ever knew. I've learned that there is no peace, only that the world moves in circles. How many Noah's have come and gone? How selfish were the people before the wars to think that they could fix the Earth when it had been here millions of years before even they? The end of the world is nothing new, it's happened many times already. We are the meek, but please books, when Schroeder returns--don't tell him."

Then all was silent, again.