

March 23, 2008

TWENTY-FIVE SQUARE MILES SURROUNDED BY REALITY

By FLORENCE WILLIAMS

My brother-in-law Peter lives in Boulder, Colorado. Whenever I use the bathroom in his house, I heave a bucket of used bath water down the toilet to flush it. This provides a welcome opportunity to enhance my deltoids, and it can save approximately 7,300 gallons of fresh water per year. Peter usually bikes, but occasionally he'll drive his hybrid Honda from where it's parked next to his xeriscaped yard to the Buddhist meditation classes he teaches downtown. He is, in short, the quintessential Boulderite.

This town practically perspires virtue. Last April, Boulder became the first city in the country to impose an additional tax on residents who use electricity made from coal (households and businesses that opt to buy power from alternative sources are exempt). About a third of the total waste stream here is recycled. The city-run North Boulder Recreation Center has one of the largest solar hydronic systems in the country. The Boulder Outlook Hotel boasts about its "zero-waste" policy. Pizza delivery boys drive Priuses. The city is ringed by 43,000 acres of protected open space -- that's nearly three times the landmass of Manhattan -- and laced with 300 miles of greenways, trout-filled creeks and designated bike lanes.

In the People's Republic of Boulder, or Bold-Air, or the Gore-Tex Vortex, as Outside magazine called it, the bicycle is chief mascot. To understand the extent to which this city of 100,000 has become a mini Copenhagen with a view, I stop by Ryan Van Duzer's house. Duzer, as he is known, is a minor celebrity.

He hosts a nightly local cable show called "Out There," and he was until recently the city's paid bicycle ambassador. Before that post, he spent three months bicycling home from his Peace Corps gig. In Honduras.

He takes me to his garage, which is stocked with no cars but about a dozen bicycles. "I've never had a driver's license," he says. "In Boulder, you can get anywhere on a bike almost as fast as a car can. I've only been hit by a car once in all my life, and it was mostly my fault." Duzer is 29, chatty, fit and chisel-jawed. He's made for outdoor TV. I can see why he was the bike ambassador, giving safety talks to kids, coordinating the 40 breakfast stations for the city's bike-to-work week and distributing free bells, maps and reflectors. In Boulder, a community program gives bikes to homeless people in exchange for work, and the city has designated dozens of new routes and trails in recent years. "If I don't drive, there's one less car on the road," Duzer says. "We can be a little less oil dependent and reduce our climate impact. Plus I have more money to spend on traveling the world!" Duzer is a bike fanatic, but he's not a bike snob, and therefore I know we'll get along fine. His main bike is an old Trek 8000 hard-tail, meaning it doesn't have rear suspension. Its bumper stickers say "My Other Bike Is a Bike" and "Make Bike Not Car." He hands me a mountain bike and a water bottle, and we take off down Juniper Avenue, through narrow alleys, down leafy paths and along quiet streets. We pedal past the community gardens east of Broadway, where food waste is collected from grocery stores and composted. After cruising past a few pleasant downtown blocks, we hit the Boulder Creek Path and take a right, toward the mountains. This is the main artery of Boulder bikeland. The creek burbles alongside, and some shirtless college students stand dripping by the bank, holding inner tubes. We pass moms with strollers, a man in a wheelchair holding a Chihuahua and a bicyclist towing a sleeping white Labrador in a child's trailer. We get passed by a few of Boulder's famously serious cyclists, clad in painfully bright Lycra and riding LeMond carbon-fiber bikes. Duzer yells, "Howdy!" or "Hey-a!" and trills his bell. **We breeze**

past the butterfly garden, the fishing pond designed exclusively for children ages 6 to 12, the bearproof canisters and the interpretive signs about neo-tropical migrating birds and protecting the water supply. In typical Boulder fashion, it's exhortative and sanctimonious: "Please don't wash anything down your sidewalk you wouldn't want a deer to drink."

Then, at Eben G. Fine Park, we come upon what appears to be a uniquely un-Boulder scene: young children pounding each other with foam swords and bludgeons. I investigate. On closer inspection, the kids are wearing elaborate costumes and speaking in medieval English. Turns out they're part of a "quest-based" summer camp called Renaissance Adventures.

Let's get one thing straight: Boulder is not for everybody. Some conservatives hate the place. The New York Times columnist David Brooks has made immense fun of it as a latte town of bourgeois bohemians with their in-your-jowls liberalism and an uncanny ability to accrue wealth while pretending to care only about following their creative visions. According to American City Business Journals, Boulder has a higher percentage of college and postcollege graduates than anywhere else in the country.

The town is rigorously conformist in its alternative way -- if you wear river sandals and sport a Timbuk2 messenger bag while sipping a doppio espresso out of a nontoxic cup, you'll feel right at home. Boulder can veer dangerously close to preciousness. Inspired by the animal rights movement, the city has officially designated pet owners as "guardians." If an eating establishment uses organic produce or composts its waste, it practically screams the fact, desperate to be heard above all the other eco cacophony. The menu at the Sunflower restaurant, for example, catalogs its lengthy cred right on the cover: it uses certified organic ingredients that are free of synthetic chemicals, fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides; it serves nothing with preservatives, chemical additives, artificial ingredients, growth hormones or antibiotics; it uses only nonirradiated herbs and spices, Celtic salt and filtered water; and it offers organic biodynamic wine. A sign next to the flusher in the bathroom informs me not only that I need to hold the button, but also why: "This is a pressurized, low-water-usage device."

At Amante Coffee, a sign announces that the shop uses natural cleaning products and conserves water, and it does not dispose of food waste down the drain (must be something about clean water for those deer). The baristas here wear Italian soccer jerseys to serve customers wearing cycling jerseys and clopping awkwardly about in their clipless cycling shoes. They're also trained to make designs with milk froth. "We do a lot of latte art here," says the barista Jeff DiPallo, 37. "It's how you pull the shot, angle the pitcher and use the spout, almost like a paintbrush. We can do leaves and geese and stuff."

Then there's the humiliation that comes with being in the fittest town in America. "If you don't have an Italian bike, you get looked down upon," says Marc Peruzzi, the editor in chief of Skiing magazine, based in Boulder. "You have to throw your ego out the window." Peruzzi says that when he rides his bike on the hills west of town, he routinely gets chased and passed by pro cyclists, even the gray-bearded ones. Still, he loves it here.

It's all too easy to make fun of Boulder, but under the town's veneer of adrenaline-jacked grooviness is a strong, prescient history of conservation and scientific innovation. At the National Center for Atmospheric Research, an impressive structure that looms over the southern end of town, scientists recently shared with Al Gore a Nobel Peace Prize for their work on the weighty Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In addition to carbon dioxide, Boulder residents willingly get taxed for open space and curbside recycling. In fact, the city first bought open space, the glorious Chautauqua Park, more than a hundred years ago, and in 1967, voters became the first in the nation to tax themselves -- four-tenths of a cent sales tax -- specifically for purchasing public parkland.

All that hillside greenery, though, comes at a cost: the exorbitant price of limited real estate. The median home price here is about half a million dollars, but that figure straddles a million if it's within walking distance of a trailhead. Boulder still has its vestigial hippies and wannabes, but unless they're sleeping in a school bus, they're the kind with trust

funds. They live in what a friend of mine calls "trophy shacks" -- tiny, unimpressive cottages that nevertheless cost a fortune because of their proximity to trails and sushi. The town's unshaven roots thankfully keep it from feeling too polished, but one gets the sense the place is entering cultural exclusivity at warp speed.

Boulder's contradictions -- is it a rarefied resort or a throwback commune? -- have given rise to a unique feel-good materialism, which, for a visitor, is actually great fun. The sparkling two-year-old St. Julien hotel offers both a \$230 Boulder Rocks hot stone treatment and a rack full of bicycles for rent just outside the front door. At tony boutiques, you can pine, as I did, for the \$200 jeans that flatter many a buff backside all over town. Or you might like to hike through the poppies under the looming Flatirons with the Adventure Rabbi while discussing the meaning of forgiveness.

Consciousness-raising restaurants might sound insufferable, but chefs all over Boulder have figured out how to make that notion pretty appealing. At the Black Cat, just off the Pearl Street Mall, the chef Eric Skokan mines ingredients for Mediterranean-fusion dishes from his own organic garden and makes the lush mozzarella from scratch. The Kitchen on upper Pearl serves a near-perfect gnocchi with organic beef, and at the jostling-room-only Boulder County Farmers' Market you can sample local goat cheeses, veggie dumplings and a confusing array of garlicks. Even fast food has caught up. On the recommendation of my friend Clay, who reviews restaurants for the Boulder Weekly, I stop by the VG Burger on 28th Street. It sits across the parking lot from a Taco Bell and next to a Dairy Queen. I order the mango-love hemp ice cream shake and oven-baked ridged organic spuds. I'm skeptical of the shake, the color of which looks remarkably like a shade of dysentery. But both items are absolutely delicious. The price for my modest shake and fries: eight bucks. I could have gotten a DQ mini-cone for a dollar.

Hoping to tap further into Boulder's peculiar moneyed vibe, I attend a public talk offered by Naropa University's "World Cafe" series. The talk is aptly called "Conscious Capitalism," by Patricia Aburdene of the "Megatrends" books fame. "We have to dwell in nowness," she tells a crowd of about 80 gathered around small tables at the Naropa campus. "Higher consciousness is necessary for invention and technical innovation." This is what's called preaching to the converted.

In the campus parking lot, I chat with Ben Stevens, who's wearing a crocheted beret atop his waist-length single dreadlock. "She didn't tell me anything I didn't already know," says Stevens, who sells fair-trade Jamaican coffee, tea and fruit drinks from a 1949 tangerine-colored bread truck at the biweekly farmers' market. Stevens says he is now on the brink of a major business breakthrough, a new beverage he hopes to distribute nationally. "It's going to blow pomegranate juice off the map," he tells me, practically bouncing up and down. "It's made with hibiscus from wild nature and has amazing amounts of electrolytes and antioxidants."

With his proceeds, he hopes to finish building an organic showcase farm in Jamaica. I believe him. Boulderites might look like they just staggered out of a boxcar or jumared up a crevasse, but chances are they're managing a social venture fund or running a natural-products company, or at least overseeing their own green investments. Wild Oats Markets started in Boulder (Whole Foods bought it last year for \$565 million), as did the Celestial Seasonings tea company, the largest of its kind in the United States. Izze fruit sodas is based here, and White Wave tofu is located just outside the city limits. Moosehead Breweries from Canada just opened its United States headquarters in the Boulder environs. Backpacker magazine recently relocated from Pennsylvania, joining the magazines VeloNews, Climbing, Inside Triathlon, Freeskier, Ski and Skiing.

One quintessential Boulder business venture is Sid Factor 7, run out of an upstairs studio on Pearl Street by Jason Olden and Eric Lyon. They design clothing and gear for outdoor companies like Pearl Izumi, CamelBak and Under Armour. They introduced their new line of "tech casual" men's jackets called Scapegoat at Paragon Sports, Flying A and other stores last fall. Sid Factor 7 embodies the Boulder ethos in every way. "We live the research," says Lyon, a lean former mountain bike racer. "We do it every day. We've ridden it, snowboarded in it, kayaked in it."

Olden, who's 35, proudly shows me his new "townie," a sleek black commuting bike that "mimics a three-speed working-class bicycle" but features Japanese fenders and a mint-condition leather Brooks saddle. Like many things in Boulder, it's working hard to look more casual than it really is.

Olden and Lyon offer their four employees an ample gear allowance and a "powder clause," meaning they can ditch the office if it snows enough for fresh tracks. And, wouldn't you know it, "we're wind-powered and we recycle."

Boulder may be the most fitness-obsessed town on the map, but it's also one of the stillest. You can go from panting your guts out in a training session with the triathlete Dave Scott at Flatiron Athletic Club to walking into the Shambhala Meditation Center for a class on "The Sadhana of Nonmeditation: A Practice of No Activity." In this town, you can find meditation classes any day of the week, yoga sessions in a wide variety of contortionist dogmas and good old-fashioned dharma talks. Home to one of the very few nationally accredited Buddhist-inspired colleges in the country, Boulder has nurtured rinpoches and transplanted a Tajik teahouse. Just off the Boulder Creek Path, the Boulder Dushanbe Teahouse serves gorgeous curries and looks like Tavern on the Green if it were designed by the Dalai Lama.

Which brings me back to the Adventure Rabbi. I'd read about Jamie Korngold on a Boulder Web site. In addition to her Talmudic qualifications, she's an expert telemark skier, a triathlete, a former ultradistance runner and an emergency medical technician. Instead of presiding over services in some airless room, she takes her congregation into the mountains. Evidently, it's a hit. Her Saturday hikes routinely approach the 50-person limit for the city's open-space permit. One fine morning near the end of my visit, I meet up with her at the lodge at Chautauqua Park, where visitors can still rent cottages and attend concerts much as they did more than 100 years ago. The people who stay here look as if they might break out into folk dancing. Being here makes me want to don wool and strum a guitar.

Korngold arrives with her husband, Jeff Finkelstein, a former ski patroller and now a Web site guru. He's an E.M.T., too.

She is 42 and blond, with calf muscles that look like cudgels. We hike up the McClintock trail under ponderosas and through lush green hillsides. Above us loom the jagged Flatirons, renowned among climbers. She tells me she grew up in Westchester, N.Y., and that her twin passions were always Judaism and nature.

She says she wants to reach young Jews because she can relate to them. "I can't tolerate being bored. The truth is, on a Saturday, I'd rather be skiing. I'd rather be hiking. If people have to choose, Judaism is going to lose." What about the rule of not exerting oneself on a Saturday?

"For me, going on a hike in the wilderness with my family, even though I'm violating the commands of not supposed to carry, not supposed to sweat, the intention of drawing closer to God is reached." It is often followed by the intention of eating imported H&H Bagels at Jimmy and Drew's Deli on 28th Street.

After a few days in Boulder, I'm pretty mellow and Rocky Mountain awe-filled myself. And since spirituality and materialism are the essential duality of the place, it seems fitting to challenge my inner Zen with a lavish meal. I meet my friends Clay and Nils, both foodies, at L'Atelier on Pearl Street. Clay convinces us to order the eight-course tasting menu, and Nils convinces us to order a Renteria Russian River 2004 pinot noir. He sips it, then proclaims it to be full-bodied and very fine. The restaurant is pleasantly candlelit, the clientele wearing suit jackets and silk sweater sets. The diners are likely a mix of atmospheric scientists and transplanted Silicon Valley millionaires. They may be spiritually enlightened, but they're not in danger of becoming monks, at least not unless the monastery comes with a sommelier.

As we slurp moules in a red curry sauce, the talk turns to sports. Naturally, Clay and Nils are serious cyclists. Clay is leaving next week for the weeklong Ride the Rockies tour, and Nils, an astrophysics professor, is training for July's Triple Bypass, a one-day exercise in pain traversing three passes in one day.

"I'm not in as good shape as last year, but I'm not too bad," says Nils, poisoning a spoon over the coconut sorbet intermezzo. "Feel my butt muscles."

Me: "I'll take your word for it."

Nils: "No, really, feel them."

Clay, writing his next restaurant review out loud: "Ah, the meal had been going so well until Nils asked us to feel his butt."

Clearly my day of asceticism is over. Tomorrow I will give up altogether on enlightenment. To ease myself back to a more banal American reality, I will wander into a nail salon called Ten20, where I will watch "Sex and the City" on a giant plasma TV and eat peanut M&Ms while having a pedicure. Then I will fly home on a jet, the kind that produces a lot of carbon dioxide, tax-free.

Essentials Boulder, Colo.

HOTELS: Boulder Outlook Hotel Basic and virtuous accommodations in the city's only zero-waste hotel. Bonus: an indoor climbing wall. 800 28th Street; (303) 443-3322; doubles from \$69. St. Julien Hotel and Spa Stylish and sprawling new 201-room property downtown offering free bike rental. 900 Walnut Street; (720) 406-9696; doubles from \$229.

RESTAURANTS AND CAFES: Amante Coffee Superb cappuccino and artistic baristas to boot. 4580 Broadway Street; (303) 448-9999. Black Cat Popular dining room where Eric Skokan serves haute Mediterranean dishes like lamb carpaccio with quinoa tabbouleh and sorrel aioli. 1964 13th Street; (303) 444-9110; entrees \$18 to \$24. Boulder Dushanbe Teahouse A traditional Tajik structure that holds tea ceremonies and offers a full menu. 1770 13th Street; (303) 442-4993; entrees \$10.50 to \$16. The Kitchen Easygoing bistro serving classics like gnocchi and cassoulet. 1039 Pearl Street; (303) 544-5973; entrees \$15 to \$27. L'Atelier The city's top choice for exquisitely inventive cuisine -- scaloppini of pork with king crab hot mayonnaise, anyone? 1739 Pearl Street; (303) 442-7233; entrees \$16 to \$29. Sunflower Organic new American cuisine from the New York-trained Jef Forsberg. 1701 Pearl Street; (303) 440-0220; entrees \$18 to \$30. VG Burger Organic burgers, fries and shakes. 3267 28th Street; (303) 440-2400.

SHOPS: Common Threads A new clothing consignment shop to reduce, reuse, recycle. 2707 Spruce Street; (303) 449-5431. Six Persimmons Apothecary Natural face creams and Chinese herbs. 840 Pearl Street; (303) 583-0179. Two Hands Paperie Charming assortment of retro-cool cards, journals and stationery. 803 Pearl Street; (303) 444 0124.

SIGHTS AND ACTIVITIES: Rent a bike at Boulder Bikesmith (2432 Arapahoe Avenue; 303-443-1132) and join the Thursday Night Cruiser ride, which meets weekly at around 7 p.m. at Scott Carpenter Park (cruiserbikeride.org). For a spiritual hike, join Jamie Korngold, the Adventure Rabbi, on Saturdays in Chautauqua Park (adventurerabbi.org). Don't miss the twice-weekly farmers' market for a taste of local cheeses and other quick bites (April to October; boulderfarmers.org).