

Choosing

WHY DO WE choose the bikes we do? It's a question the OEMs have been asking themselves forever. My suspicion is that it has a lot to do with the stories we make up for ourselves; stories that serve to sort out all the people, places and things in our lives. It's not rational. Focus groups are missing the point.

Here's my theory: In essence, we're all novelists. Perhaps after years of watching too many TV reruns, we're quick to concoct dramatic plot lines to fit the few known facts we might have about any subject and, without any corroboration, leap to the conclusion that we "know" the whole story.

Pick any subject. Well, for our purposes, pick any motorcycle. The more popular the brand, the more likely that we'll have made up some good stories about it, so rather than sidetrack my argument by running into irrational prejudice, I'll make up a fictitious brand. But imagine any brand you know.

This brand has a long and illustrious history. Some riders are drawn to it particularly for this fact, perhaps for nationalistic qualities that they admire in its country of origin. One of the qualities of our made-up stories is that they make us feel powerful, they differentiate us from others. We usually don't admit it, but, "I'm right, you're wrong" is the meaning they convey. So, "Mine is better than yours," might be the story of our motorcycle. Separating ourselves from others is a way to control feelings of being lost in the crowd. By identifying ourselves with a smaller subset of the group, we avoid being dominated by the majority and can even feel superior, achieving our own sense of domination. Depending on our need for belonging with a group we want to join, we may choose a motorcycle regardless of its mechanical goodness, simply because ownership will insure our acceptance.

How powerful is this need? One of our contributors, who shall remain nameless, routinely has business with the owners of a particular brand. So awkward is the subject of his ownership of a different brand, that he would rather hide the fact than deal with their "mine is better than yours" stories and attitudes. Yesterday, he told me that he has decided to sell his motorcycle to buy one that will be accepted by this group. At least he can admit it. Most of the time, our true motivations are hidden, cloaked in justifications—more stories.

Because of this group psychology, some of the stories we share don't even need to be verbalized. Everyone knows that Brand X is the product of a country whose engineers are legendary for their...domination.



Of course, these are relatively harmless games when it comes to motorcycles, although they must frustrate the product planners to no end. Regardless of how many Pavlovian cues they may incorporate into products, meant to pull the buyers of another brand onto their bikes, the mythic hold of our stories is not so easily broken.

The real problem is when we make up stories about other people. By simple association, we can attribute all sorts of qualities to people we hardly know. My picture above, aboard the BMW R1150GS is a perfect example. Just after I became editor, I had correspondence with several readers who assumed all sorts of things about me because they had pre-existing stories about BMW owners. I was one of "them." But, in fact, I've never owned a BMW. I chose the image based on the fact that if I could have afforded one, the GS was the most impressive bike I had tested the year that photo was taken. The problem with making up stories, and I'm sure you associate with people who have made up stories about you without knowing you—perhaps *because* you own a motorcycle—is that the stories prevent us from ever knowing the other person. Although they offer the payoff of making us feel self-righteous and immune to domination, the downside is that they isolate us. We can't share ourselves with people we've boxed up in stories. And, for the obsessively judgmental personality, it can be so extreme that it becomes a form of solitary confinement that kills the joy of living and ruins one's health. Can you think of any of your acquaintances that describes?

Obviously, most of MCN's readers are considerably more open-minded, or they

would cancel their subscriptions wholesale every time we aired any criticism of their favorite brand. But the point is that being judgmental in this way, whether it's about motorcycles, people, places or things is a trap. In our sense of superiority and disdain, we are locked up in a prison of our own making. We can't breathe the fresh air of new experiences, make new friends, or try new motorcycles.

I'm not suggesting that any of you are such a hard case as I've described, but the tendency to make up stories is very subtle. We often do it without noticing that we've done it. Take a look at all the relationships in your life, and see if you can find one that isn't working. Do you have a particularly convincing story about that person? Do you wish that person would change? Can you see that your story doesn't allow any possibility for them to be any different with you?

Obviously, I'm writing from personal experience. It took some extraordinary coaching, but I came to my own realization about stories some five years ago. Things opened up for me in miraculous ways when I let go of my stories. It gave me the courage to repair important relationships, and opportunities appeared that I wouldn't have believed possible before.

I'm not a psychologist, although my father had a distinguished career in psychoanalysis, so the subject is natural to me. I'm only suggesting that if we let go of our judgements and stories, we'll see how much we have in common with one another and our lives will be richer as a result.

Motorcycling is an inspiring activity, rich with colorful characters and true individualists, thrilling in its physical challenges, thought-provoking in its elegant engineering and full of opportunities to share in its community.

I'm truly blessed to spend my time sharing this magazine with all of you each month. Your letters constantly reveal what a unique resource this magazine is, and how much you value what we strive to do.

MCN is truly a community effort. When you ask, "is someone else having this problem?" and others respond, as a group we generate knowledge that can be found in no other way. I love that.

I just wanted you to know that I value truth more than stories, and you can count on me to keep your faith in MCN. Cheers!

DAVE SEARLE

—Dave Searle
Editor