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LIVING CARLESS IN A CARCRUSHED WORLD

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My antipathy toward the automobile goes way back. For a period as a young child I refused to ride in the car unless coerced into it, because its noise frightened me. I had similar reactions to vacuum cleaners and flush toilets: someone else had to flush the toilet, and I tried to stay at the opposite end of the house from any operating vacuum cleaner.

Looking back on it, my gut reaction to these three technologies had a lot of justification, which of course as a child I could not verbalize or intellectualize. The separation from the natural world, the out-of-sight-out-of-mind "convenience" of these devices, the pollution and other ecological side-effects of their production and use, their place as products of a humanly exploitive world economy, their substitution of consumerism for a valuing of one's own labor in service of one's own needs, their devaluing of the human body and physical activity - in short, their replacement of simple, natural acts (self-sufficient yet relational at the same time) with complex, anti-natural ones (with the illusion of "independence" but tying one into utter dependence on centralized technology) - all these would have been good reasons for me to reject them, had I known then what I know now. As it was, it was their sheer noise which turned me against them. Not coincidentally, it is noise more than anything else which dependably characterizes the assault of our "civilization" on all that is natural: on life and "inert" matter everywhere, on us.

In any case, as you can imagine, I eventually learned to overcome my fear of flushing the toilet, rather than push my welcome with my parents (who thought once I was out of diapers they'd be done with such things) too far. Similarly, in order to become a "responsible citizen" of my household, I learned to use the vacuum cleaner myself rather than running away from it in unmanly tears. And not only did I learn to ride in a car, but, when I came of age, I was even convinced to learn how to drive and get a driver's license (the true symbol in our culture, it seemed, of individual identity, "independence" and adulthood).

I did not actually feel much more friendly to cars at that time than I had in early childhood. I bicycled, ran, walked, or (in extreme cases) took public transportation wherever I could in my suburban hometown. I refused rides to high school even on inclement days when virtually everyone else came by car. I cross-country skied to track practice when the roads were too icy or snowy for my bike. At a time when my classmates were comparing the conspicuous internally-combusting status symbols given to them as pre-graduation presents by their rich parents, and driving them anywhere and everywhere to demonstrate their maturity, I was becoming even more unpopular among my peers by writing an editorial in the high school newspaper decrying the use of cars as

wasteful, irresponsible, and destructive.

An encounter with too many decibels at a rock concert temporarily traumatized my hearing and turned me even more firmly against noise as I entered college. I chose to attend a small college where I could walk everywhere. I believe that on several occasions I went months at a time without ever getting into a vehicle of any sort (let alone a car), only climbing onto a train to visit my family when breaktime came around. This was a somewhat unusual way to live in the East Coast metropolitan corridor in the 1980s, but it suited me. Late in high school my boycott of obnoxious technologies had extended to include television, and I never had become involved with computers, so by my late teens, without realizing it, I was a regular Luddite. I'd also become a vegetarian, though veganism and growing my own food would have to wait another half-decade or so.

But this essay is about the automobile. What I am finding is that when one troubles, embraces, or rejects a car (to borrow from John Muir), one finds it hitched to everything else in the universe. So it's impossible to participate in or reject automobile culture without many other values and life choices coming into play as well. But since cars embody so well what our culture stands for, they're a useful place to put our attention.

And what does our culture stand for? It stands for: - Separation of human from earth. Separation from the elements. Steady-state "comfort" over the ebb and flow of nature's or our body's energies. Quantity (of miles travelled) over quality (of the trio). Accomplishment of human-defined goals over sensitivity to the world we're part of. Efficiency of "task execution" over the integrity and flow of experience. Impatience over patience. Arrogance over reverence. Economic "me-firstism" over ecological harmony. And yet reckless dependence on the "system" over self-sufficient awareness.

It stands for the destruction of all that is real and its replacement by the fantastic productions of human invention and self-involvement gone awry. It stands for selfishness, egotism, fear, and isolation over humility, compassion, trust, and community. It stands for the narrowest definition of life our world has ever seen, whereby the anthropocentric dissection and compartmentalization of all experience, used in an attempt to control what cannot be controlled, has so affected the quality of our lives that our sacred interconnections with the rest of the natural world have been obscured almost beyond recognition.

It means we are growing up inside cages of our own (or our forebears') designing. Based on the premise of separateness, these cages lead to actions that are literally suicidal for the whole...for the whole human, for the whole local community, for the whole species, for the whole Earth.

What does this rant have to do with cars? Let me return to my story.

I had to declare a truce with the internal combustion engine for my last two years of college, as I climbed aboard a travelling school bus with twenty other students of ecology to visit wild and un-wild corners of the American continent, to witness the integrity and disintegration of both its natural and human communities. We burned a lot of gasoline, but we diluted the crime by sharing in it, gaining perspectives and learning about ways of living that would hopefully decrease our own individual negative planetary impacts in the long run. We also learned about community in the process - both the amazing natural communities we were privileged to experience as we camped out, and the type of human community which arises when there are no private vehicles to shuttle individual people from private workspace to private living space in individualized lives.

We visited old mountain communities, Amish and Mennonite communities, Native American communities, where each person's sense of being part of an extended human family - with a sacred relationship to the rest of the earth - remained, to a degree, intact. We got a glimpse of what life must have been like outside of the "cages" that largely define the experience of most people in our culture: cars, separate houses (which, by the standards of most indigenous and self-built dwellings, are literal fortresses against the natural world and other people), and the technologies that employ and entertain the modern American. More important, we discovered that we ourselves were a community, free to interact because, rather than making us strangers to one another, our living situation demanded that we cooperate. Without walls between us, without high-technological distractions, we had no choice. Without the goals of personal accumulation, self-promotion, or one-upmanship on nature - all of which were antithetical to the spirit of the expedition - what were we left with? Just ourselves and the rest of life.

Even some of the mental baggage that accompanied us from our lives in American society began to fall away in such a setting. Sometimes, like external clutter, the internal clutter which our narrow, frightened culture and its overbearing artifacts had produced in us over two decades of immersion seemed like just a memory. "Once far enough from the house, / from the confines of civilized language, / I forget who I'm supposed to be, / and become who I am", I wrote in a poem a decade later. I sensed a different dimension of time when encountering the earth on its own terms, particularly in the Southwest. Like Colin Fletcher, who described his explorations of the Colorado River in *The Man Who Walked Through Time*, it sometimes seemed that as a group we "walked through time" - returned to "earth time", which seemed like both past and future, in which human activity and conception of time once again reflected the rhythms and cycles of the nearly timeless earth. The Southwestern desert, its canyons and mesas, can teach many things, among them humility, and what it feels like, stripped of most of one's cultural artifacts, to be a natural, human being, part of, and still in a we of, the Earth.

It was with regret that we trod out of the wilderness back onto our bus. And it

was with even greater regret that I, for one, contemplated returning to the mad, suicidal lifestyle which awaited most of us on graduation. Even if we found jobs working for causes we believed in, doing things we enjoyed, it was likely none of us could escape the apparent necessity of having our own car, our own house, our own insulated, compartmentalized life. Circumstances and logistics would force most of these choices if we wanted to function as members of our society. It was either that, or do something just as crazy and unusual as what we had just done.

I chose the latter course. I returned to the Southwest, determined to live without a house, without a car, for the most part without electricity. I wanted to spend my time in direct relation with authentic natural and human community. I ended up living on the Hopi Indian Reservation, in a tent, spending most of my discretionary time for a year-and-a-half walking up and down an ancient canyon with my chosen companions, mentally retarded (but spiritually astute) Hopis. The rest of the time worked in a job at a center for the same mentally retarded Hopis - a job I suspect I never could have landed if I had come with all the baggage and expectations of my culture.

And on the Hopi Reservation I was not alone in feeling that in many respects the automobile is a violation of all that is sacred, an affront to human and natural community, an ugly artifact of technological civilization gone awry, and a bad idea. Cars were a relatively recent introduction there, and traditionalists still held out against them. Yet most adult Hopis had felt compelled to get a vehicle for economic reasons, as the Hopis' traditional subsistence economy had been disrupted by the same forces that had kidnapped their children, attempted to destroy their traditional means of self-government, and wrought havoc on their culture (though less so than for most other Native American groups). I never for a moment, though, was tempted to get a car. I never wanted to be anywhere else than where I was.

When I decided to move on, it was to become in some respects closer to - rather than farther away from - the earth. Again, a car could not have taken me where I wanted to go, and seemed inimical to my journey. I wanted to learn how to grow my own food and to explore other aspects of appropriate technology and rural living. I also wanted to reintegrate into the culture I'd come from - i.e. white culture - in a responsible way, to impact more lives than my own as I attempted to lead what I hoped was an ecological life.

I found that I was not alone in my aspirations. For most of the ensuing years I have lived with groups of people - in both "intentional" and "unintentional" community - trying to model an alternative to American consumerism, to rediscover the meaning of cooperation, to recapture the natural sense of extended human and nonhuman family and shed many of the distractions that have interfered with it. My companions in this have not always articulated it in such high-flown terms; it might be simpler just to say we were trying to "live life the way it's meant to be lived" - the way that feels natural, which is a life of

relation rather than atomization.

Though none of these groups has managed to replace completely the "need" for the car as an economic survival tool in our society, they have replaced *most* uses to which cars are usually put. Instead of living apart from our work, apart from our social life, apart from our entertainment and education, we have lived, worked, socialized with, entertained and educated one another. What's more, we've done these things *in place*, in relative harmony with our environment, the source of our greatest education. When low-impact, cooperative living on the Earth replaces an existence surrounded, insulated, and isolated, by an accumulation of gadgets, one's companions and teachers are no longer artificial people- and experience-substitutes like television but instead the natural world, natural processes, one's own home, and real people sharing real lives. In such a setting one's identity no longer seems dependent on a driver's license, let alone a car - in fact, the latter can be an obstacle to attempts to reestablish our honest place in the world.

But cooperative, relatively carless situations are still few and far between. And outside of them, it is tempting to despair. A decade-and-a-half after I got my license and swore I'd never own a car (a vow I've kept), there are more cars than ever before - and more pollution, more pavement and other car related ecological oppression, more human alienation, more economic pressures to do whatever is necessary (including more driving to survive in a fragmented, ecologically illiterate, disintegrating society in which we know not who our human and nonhuman neighbors are...and, obviously, more depressing things to escape from...in, of course, the car.

For this reason, I have penned this appeal to the members of a club that is forming (I'm sure you're out there):

CARSICK? SO ARE WE!

We're the Carsick Billions, with members worldwide of every species. Don't get exhausted, get carfree. Join us, and change the world. POB 3678, Eugene, OR 97403.

As I wait for responses I have reaffirmed my resolution to contribute as little as I can to the cancerous growth of the car culture. Sharing the use of a vehicle is one way to do this, but the most powerful way is simply to find alternative ways of living that don't require a car. If no-one attempts to do this, no-one else will do it either, and we'll be in even worse shape than we already are as the future unfolds. And the more of us with experience living outside the cages of separateness erected by our civilization, the more real life will actually be lived even as the gears of unreal distraction grind to their final excruciating disharmonious end. As a result, when natural time returns to our experience, we as a species will be more likely to recognize it. And, if the Carsick Billions can find one another, we'll have a better time until then too.

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