

A Car-less Present to Myself

by Ann Gerhardt MD December 2018

How many of us can refrain from buying just a little something for ourselves while in the holiday shopping bustle? Previously, not me. This year is different, though. No doo-dads, just gifting myself the divestment of a few stressful things.

Among other castaways was my car, made easier by the wreck that demanded a decision about the fate of my Honda Fit's poor mangled body. Now car-less, I'm liberated from traffic and am feeling challenged in a fun way.

Why I hate cars. 1) **Sitting in a car isn't healthy.** Adults model for children lousy, driving-heavy activity patterns, instead of navigating the blocks to school, work or a bus stop under their own power. Many think it's weird to walk anywhere if a car is available. That car ride supplants an opportunity for healthful physical activity - Exercise that doesn't involve the cost, intimidation and smell of a gym.

Cars are destructive. Their drivers kill people by not seeing, not obeying traffic laws, and self-centeredly and obviously driving unsafely. More than 90 people die in the U.S. each day from motor vehicle crashes. The 2017 death toll exceeded 40,000. If a virus caused that death rate, the population would be enraged, engaged and terrified. Instead people blithely consider their cars to be a necessary appliance serving a critical function... like a toilet.

Cars pollute and generate greenhouse gases. The atmospheric CO₂ level passed 400 ppm in September 2016. That was the point of no return. Global warming is now unstoppable, unless some super-brilliant people figure out effective ways to remove CO₂ from the air. Maybe they'll devise a way to turn the carbon into diamonds.

My small contribution to CO₂ reduction won't keep islands from being submerged, hurricanes, tornadoes and floods from killing people, or displaced persons from dying of starvation and infectious disease. That would take a societal commitment to renewable & human energy. Well, I'm part of society and I'm making a commitment. **The only thing I liked about having a car** was its utility as a bumper sticker display. I've considered plastering them on a rain slicker, creating a moving, meme-filled billboard.

Planning my transportation mode for a day's activities takes the form of a fun puzzle. Not a hard puzzle, though, since living in Midtown Sacramento and working within 2 miles of my home make car-less life much easier than it might be for others. Here, readily available alternatives include walking, taking public transportation, riding my bicycle or renting a Jump bike. I doubt that I'll mimic those third world pictures of a man toting a refrigerator on his bike, but I've carried a lot of stuff onto a bus and use full grocery bags as weight lifting exercise while walking home from the store.

Sure, I drive sometimes... I have access to our now lone family car, Lyft drivers, friends and Zipcar's hourly rentals. I avoid them, however, unless I need to carry something large or heavy, will travel a long way, or stay out past the last bus.

This works for me because my sports injuries haven't yet disabled me, and I live and work in a densely populated area. **It's sad that more people don't have the transportation options of Midtown and dense population centers, but it's the communities' fault.** They have fought smart land use. They want tax revenue and large yards. Sprawl makes it impossible for public transportation to provide frequent, cost-effective service to all. And Jump bikes and Zipcars aren't going to appear in neighborhoods with 150 people per square mile.

Able-bodied adults and children can walk, cycle and take public transportation – They just need to think about making it possible. People of limited means could spend more on healthy food and bicycles if they didn't waste money on a car. Most aged people shouldn't be living in the middle of nowhere, where they drive everywhere, endangering everyone with their declining vision, hearing, reaction time and flexibility. Does anyone need to live in the middle of nowhere if their livelihood doesn't depend on it? Dense population centers enable effective public and private transportation options that allow us to be healthier, kill fewer people and be more kind to the planet.