

MY CAR-LESS LIFE: *how I've managed to survive and thrive without ever owning one.*

By Cynthia Close, published in the Burlington Free Press 2013

Getting your license was THE rite of passage at my regional high school in northern New Jersey. We all took Driver Ed. We also had a smoking lounge for students too (would you believe! This was 1962). The PTA and the faculty figured it was better if they had a place for kids to smoke in school instead of having them sneak out back behind the gym between classes for a smoke.

I took Driver Ed., passed, got my license and started driving the 10 miles or so to school instead of taking the bus. My mom and I shared a Corvair. This was the same model Corvair that catapulted Ralph Nadar to fame with his exposé UNSAFE AT ANY SPEED. Of course, at the time when I was driving it, no one knew. My brief relationship with the automobile was not a pretty one. I was easily distracted (cell phones were not in existence so they were not to blame), received several warnings for speeding, had a few fender-benders, and then a rather catastrophic accident involving the above mentioned Corvair which is worthy of a separate story that I won't go into here. The year was 1964. It was the date of my last driver's license. I decided that driving was just not in the cards for me if I wanted to live a long happy life.

The fact that cars have become so ubiquitous in our lives as creatures on this earth in what is the blink of an eye in evolutionary terms, has not only caused catastrophic damage to our environment, but has changed our relationship to the natural world, our psyche, and the bodies we inhabit. You may be shaking your heads and rolling your eyeballs at this point. The irony is that my Dad was in the automobile business and if he were alive today I know he would be among the crowd of eyeball rollers. I believe it is this resistance, this denial to face the consequences of our love affair with the automobile that may ultimately drive our civilization to the top of the junk heap of history.

Cars are considered such a necessity for life that a non-driver like myself is sometimes looked upon with suspicion ("there must be something wrong with her") or with sympathy, curiosity and offers of help when none is needed.

Granted, I have constructed my life in a way that has made this life style choice possible. The fact that I was born in New York City and had a love of city life from the get go was instrumental in setting the foundation for my future. I always embraced the fact that I could walk everywhere I needed to go, and get whatever I wanted, day or night. Being able to attend the finest museums and experience a world of diverse cultures within a few blocks was thrilling and convinced me to pursue a career in the Arts.

After High School, I set my sights on going to college in a major metropolitan city and chose Boston University. Some kids who lived in the Boston to mid-Atlantic corridor brought their cars to school, so they could drive home. Not me. Back then the fares on student flights were so cheap, I could easily take public transportation to the airport and

fly home. Boston, like New York, has an extensive public transit system made up of trolleys, buses, and subways that run 7 days a week and late into the evening. When all else fails, there is always an eager taxi driver willing to take you where you need to go.

Boston was such a great city, I settled there following graduation, had an exciting career as an Artist, educator and director of a documentary film company. I traveled all over the world, lived in Europe, and never needed a car. Most countries outside the USA have fine train and bus systems. It is only the relatively recent impact of the auto industry on growing economies of developing nations like China and India that are causing these nations serious pollution and traffic problems that may be beyond their abilities to control.

I credit my overall excellent health, in large part, to not having a car. I have never had a weight problem. Never had to join a gym for exercise. Walking is my preferred means of transportation. When I decided to retire to Burlington Vermont, all my city friends were shocked. They feared that I couldn't survive here without a car. "You'll get a license now, won't you?" they said. The answer is no. I am long past the point in my life where I feel the need to drive. When I consider the positive impact on the environment that my 66 years of avoiding car ownership on earth has had, it is tempting to feel smug. Think of the piles of aging, rusted steel that each car, when it has come to the end of its functional life, occupies in the junkyards of our planet. Think about the water resources needed to build each car in the first place. Think about the thousands of gallons of gas saved, the incalculable amount of greenhouse gasses not emitted into the atmosphere just because one person chose not to drive.

My 42-year-old daughter and her husband follow in my footsteps - neither of them have ever owned a car (they live in Montreal, my son-in-law has a license and they rent or borrow a car to come to Burlington - I take the bus to Montreal.) Their decision is based upon their desire to protect the earth for their children. I moved to Burlington because I can have my city life and my increasing desire to be closer to nature, and the beauty that it offers to my soul as I age, all in one place. I encourage everyone to try it, living a car-less life. Maybe I should start a self-help group, a 12-step program, like AA. Give it up. You can do it. You will be happier and healthier. Your kids will thank you. The planet will thank you.