

On Sacrifice, Spirituality and Silver Linings - Stephen Bede Scharper
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Did you ever think of giving up your car?

When I posed this question to my wife two years ago, she rolled her eyes and the bubbles above her head flashed the words “Ridiculous!” “Impossible!” “Recycling and composting are fine, Dear,” I heard her thoughts missile toward me, “but this is going way too far.”

I felt like Galileo proposing a heliocentric universe to Pope Urban VIII. Suddenly, I was questioning a sacred tradition. After all, this was the way the world had been since the ancient Greeks. Wasn't it Heraclitus who said that to be fully human one needed locomotion, preferably in a Lexus? I suddenly was asking with Prufrock, “Do I dare/Disturb the universe?”

After a cup of tea, though, some calmness settled onto the conversation. She and I were able to discuss pros and con of not renewing the lease on our car now that we were living in the city. On the plus side, we knew that we would save some money – some estimates claim an annual savings of \$7000 – and it would be environmentally beneficial. According to pollution Probe, an average lightweight car in Canada annually spews 4480 kilograms of carbon monoxide, 200 kilograms of carbon dioxide, and a fulsome soup of other noxious gases.

On the downside, we knew that it would be an inconvenience. We would be dependent on the TTC, shopping would be more labour-intensive, and if we had an emergency with our young son, we would have to rely on friends, cab or ambulance.

After several months and many tea-laden colloquies, however, my wife joined me in the heliocentric universe. We gave up the car. (During our first “car-less” weekend, my wife rented a car. It sat in the driveway.)

Interestingly, we both viewed the prospect as primarily a sacrifice. But a funny thing happened on the way to a car-challenged lifestyle. We gradually became aware of unforeseen benefits, silver linings that “came dropping slow” into our horizon of awareness.

First, we noticed less stress in our lives. Instead of waiting till the last minute to get somewhere, plopping in the car, snaking our way through traffic snarls and snarling motorists, and bickering about what would have been the best route to take, we found our travel was more relaxed on public transit. I also wasn't burdened with a low grade anxiety about getting a ticket, or being towed, or changing the oil, or driving though lousy weather.

Secondly, we found on the streetcar or subway that we could talk together as a family. Our streetcar time became a family story time. After dropping off our son, my wife and I would then often walk downtown to work together. Car-less living had let to enhanced family bonding.

Thirdly, we noticed a marked decrease in impulse buying. We were much less likely to go out in –20 degree weather or a rain-soaked evening to get a video or a dessert or some other non-essential without a car. Also, we were reluctant to buy anything larger than a loaf of bread without series strategizing.

Less stress. Increased family bonding. Diminished consumerism. We had not counted on these when we decided to relinquish our vehicle. These were for us spiritual as well as material benefits.

As Canada ponders the sacrifices and costs of a Kyoto accord, perhaps we might view striving for societal sustainability as not just a matter of sacrifice. This isn't about everyone giving up one's car; it's about discerning how we are to relate to this new ecological moment. Sometimes fundamental changes make room in your life for new and fine things to happen. It's not just about sacrifice, but about making a space for a novel and possibly enhanced way of life. It may also hold hidden harvests for the spiritual and material well-being, not only of our families and nation, but of our larger household, the Earth.

Stephen Bede Scharper teaches religion and ecology at the Institute for Environmental Studies, University of Toronto.