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THE DIARY OF AN UBER DRIVER

Stories from the Backseat of American Life

by

Jim Lantos

Sample — 15 pages

Part I · From the Blog

The Car and the Bicycle

As an Uber and Lyft driver who has navigated the mean streets of Boston more than most, I have witnessed the mayhem of the open road in all its fury. From fender-benders at ill-designed rotaries to the slow broil of bottlenecked bumper-to-bumperdom on Storrow Drive.

Nothing seems to excite as much unmitigated road rage as the clashes between motorists and bicyclists. It seems these two species of road runners are hard-wired as natural enemies, intransigently irreconcilable as a red-state Republican and a blue-state Democrat.

Part of the rivalry, of course, stems from David-and-Goliath reality: lightweight pick-uppable two-wheelers are no match for two-ton town cars whose drivers, insulated in their heavy-metal cocoons, seem to have a nonchalant mentality that justifies any roadkill in the name of the survival of the fittest (aka, getting to the office on time).

On the other hand, how many bicyclists take to the road with a haughty holier-than-thou attitude that their light carbon footprint gives them the moral high ground to weave in and out of traffic lanes and sail through stop signs? Or more adventurously, as seen in videos and photos online, riding their bikes in the O’Neill Tunnel or on the Zakim Bridge?

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A simple yet important invention may have played a big role in helping to bring the car and the bike together again after they went their separate ways in the early 20th century. The bike rack. You don't need to be a rocket scientist to understand this one. The bike rack allows people to take their bike to other places, most likely some rails-to-trail or other pathway, in order to enjoy their riding experience. Multiple bikes hitched to a rack lets the family enjoy time together out on the trail.

In general, I think we are better off as a society building bridges, not walls — but in the case of these two irreconcilable forces, auto versus bike, I think another important factor in forging a symbiosis are bike lanes, a reasonable solution to resolve the rivalry of the open road.

Bike lanes have been around in Boston for more than 40 years, after the gasoline shortages of the 1970s convinced many commuters that biking was no longer the transportation of choice for eccentric Europeans, children or witches. Who could forget the spectacle of Elvira Gulch — a.k.a. the Wicked Witch of the West — pedaling madly down a Kansas lane in The Wizard of Oz?

Or does anyone today remember how the Schwinn corporation became the leading brand in the 1950s by saturating the tee-vee screens with commercials pitching bicycles to boys (and tomboys) under the age of 13?

As for the Europeans, look at the French, who manage to devote a whole month to the Tour de France, a competitive bike race that sends hundreds of cyclists pedaling their way across the entire nation. Eat your carburetors out, Americans. The French are not a gas-guzzling four-wheeled species who get adrenaline highs revving up their engines. Rather, they enjoy the gentle

whoosh of spoke and sprocket. You won't hear Kraftwerk's famous "Tour de France" over the loudspeakers at Indianapolis or Daytona.

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But there were a few exceptions to America's love affair with the internal combustion engine. In the 1950s, Boston's own Dr. Paul Dudley White — President Eisenhower's personal physician, a pioneer in preventive medicine — started a boomlet of sorts through his advocacy of bicycling to improve cardiovascular health. He recommended cycling for Ike after his heart attack. To this day, his customized Schwinn hangs in the Museum of Science, and a 17-mile section of the bike path along the Charles River, first opened in 1975, bears his name. Curiously, I had not known about this until one night I got a ride hail to pick up someone on the path near Harvard Stadium.

By the 1970s, red-blooded American adults emerged as a new market for bicycle-makers. Bicycle sales nationwide doubled between 1972 and 1974 alone, and Boston was ready by expanding its bicycle-path network and by working with the Boston Area Bicycling Coalition to sponsor annual Bike Week and Bike Day events.

In 1991, the Central Transportation Planning Staff (CTPS) conducted a household survey of travel behavior in eastern Massachusetts, which reported that there were 34,000 daily bicycle trips ending in the City of Boston, 7,000 of which were for work purposes. Earlier CTPS surveys had indicated that bicycle volumes grew by 30 to 50 percent between 1975 and 1980, and by an additional 10 to 30 percent between 1980 and 1985.

Boston took a major lap forward at the turn of the century. After Bicycling Magazine labeled Boston the least bicycle-friendly city in the country, Mayor Thomas M. Menino signed an executive order on November 17, 1999 re-establishing the Boston Bicycle Advisory

Committee (BBAC) and making a renewed and formal commitment to improve bicycling conditions in the city. Presumably, the mess created by the Big Dig was a factor in Boston's poor rating.

Menino's effort included such initiatives as expanding Boston's network of bicycle paths and designated bicycle lanes, as well as improved parking facilities for bicycles. Another priority of the city's renewed bike-friendly effort was the Bikes-on-the-T program designed to accommodate commuters who wished to carry bicycles on regional buses and subways.

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Today, the City of Boston reports that it has a large network of conventional bike lanes, which are four to six feet wide and along a curbside or next to parked cars. It has pledged to expand this network by adding both buffered and separated bike lanes. Buffered bike lanes are usually one to two feet wide on each side of the conventional bike lane, thus providing extra space between bikes and moving or parked cars. The separated bike lanes involve reconfiguring the street to create a raised lane for bicycles between the curb and car-parking lanes, with the aim of reducing accidents caused by bicyclists swerving into traffic to avoid car doors opening in front of them.

I've seen these under construction on some very heavily cycled roads such as Beacon Street in Somerville and along Commonwealth Avenue near BU. This is good news because the BU area is one of the most dangerous. Bicyclists on these paths, of course, must still observe all regulations such as giving the right of way to pedestrians and stopping at signs or red lights.

I would be remiss not to mention the great risk of riding your bike in a city of angry and sometimes unaware or out-of-town drivers. Every few months we seem to read about sad and tragic deaths or injury caused to cyclists. Spots where a biker was killed are typically marked

with a used bike, painted all white, placed as a memorial by a worldwide organization called Ghost Bikes.

One of the most popular rails-to-trails pathways in Massachusetts is the Minuteman Bikeway, which follows an old rail bed through Bedford, Lexington, Arlington, and Cambridge before finally connecting with the T station at Alewife. True to its name, the Minuteman trail runs through the towns where the American Revolution began in 1775. Along the same pathways where Minutemen once avoided redcoats before engaging them in battle at Lexington, urban riders today seek to avoid similar conflict with red lights by cycling along the trail. Ironically, once they arrive and gather at Alewife they end up doing battle with other commuters in the end. Unlike their brethren at Lexington, though, they staunchly avoid looking into the whites (reds?) of their eyes.

I'm sort of wondering how our nation's history might have been rewritten if Paul Revere had announced: "One if by land, and two if by sea; and I on my bicycle seat will be."

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Some drivers, including Uberists, might be tempted to badmouth these initiatives as another scheme to rob motorists of precious road space. Yet others seek wisdom and humor to guide their understanding.

In the long run, it makes for a better commute for everyone, doesn't it? Sharing our urban space is a good policy. And it makes me feel groovy. You know, as in that old Simon & Garfunkel song — slow down, you move too fast / You got to make the morning last / Just kicking down the cobblestones / Looking for fun and feeling groovy.

I know, it was inspired by the 59th Street Bridge in New York City. But it could just as well apply to the Zakim, or the Longfellow.

Part II · The Backseat

One

I began driving for Uber around Thanksgiving 2013, after a Facebook ad caught my eye. The pay offered was $25 an hour. I had heard of the company. I didn't really know what it was about, but everyone thought the concept was hot at the time. Uber had landed in Boston the year before — September 19, 2012, according to the Boston Business Journal.

At first, the idea of driving a cab did not strike me as high-minded. I went to college. At 47, this wasn't the life I'd pictured. But the hours were mine, the car was mine, the money was daily. I didn't know yet that London cab drivers make $150,000 a year.

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Fast-forward to April 2017. I had Ubered periodically in the interim — a month here, a month there — and my 2012 Ford Escape Hybrid had died from the breakneck driving. I decided to try again. Ten to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, aiming for $1,000 to $1,500 a week in gross earnings. I had built a startup in 2001 the same way. I knew I could do it.

One day in late April I got a signal for a ride in Arlington, the town the British soldiers knew as Menotomy on the night Paul Revere rode through. Arlington is bisected by Mass Ave, and

along each side of Mass Ave there are steep hills — part of a ring of semi-continuous hills that encircle Boston on almost every side.

This call was from a street far up one of those hills. There was nothing special about the ride. I climbed block after block past the usual suburban mishmash. But as I pulled up to the rider's house, a view opened in front of me that I had not been prepared for — the entire downtown Boston skyline, laid out below like a model. Stunning. And in the middle of nowhere. I would never have known it was there if I hadn't gone to pick up the woman I was picking up.

She was going to the airport — a 25-minute drive. As we talked, I mentioned what I had just seen. She told me the neighborhood was called Symms Hill, the site of a former hospital, now an apartment complex and an assisted-living facility. I told her I had maybe a dozen of these hidden spots stored in my head from three years of Boston driving, and it hit me at that moment that I should start writing them down. She suggested I call the book "The Secret Panoramas of Boston".

That was where this book began. I have since compiled more than seventy of those hidden vistas from my own trips and from tips given to me by riders. The panoramas were the first thing I started writing down. The journals, the recipes, the restaurant picks, the confessions, the letters in case the halibut fisherman did not come back — all of that came later.

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One day 2 year later, in 2019, I decided to stick a journal in the back seat of my car. I told passengers they could write whatever they wanted. I had been thinking about it for years. A guy in Chicago had done it and Uber had run a little piece on him. I thought: mine would not be like that. Bostonians may not go for it. This is their paid time in the Uber, after all.

I was wrong. The first journal filled in about a year — 170 entries. Then the pandemic hit and I stopped driving for almost three years. I moved to Maine. When I started again in 2023, I was in a new car, a new state, with a new kind of rider — vacationers, tourists, fishermen, Bowdoin undergrads heading home, priests on retreat, a retired trauma nurse on her way to a nursing-home shift — and I put out a new journal. That one is almost full too.

Between the two of them, there are more than three hundred entries. They were written by strangers who had no idea who would read them next. But they were excited to contribute to the project and knowing that others would read their words. It also speaks more broadly to the problem we have in society---that people don't talk to each other. Everything has become text messaging or social media. I learned from this – that people are desperate to talk. To share personal stories. To be a part of something bigger. Hundreds of people have said this is a "necessary" project and that they would pay money for this book.

This is the book.

Part III · From the Journals

Selected entries

13 March 2026 · Maine → Saco, ME

I've had my best and worst year of life. I've been the daughter, mother, wife, grandmother, and soldier.

2022 I retired active duty trauma nurse. 3 tours of duty to Iraq. Performing CPR while holding the artery from squirting blood from her open wounds. But the Army said, I'm too old for them. You see, I turned 60 and the younger generation is moving in, and Big Army is moving us out. Weeding the branches.

When you deployed, you live, breathe, eat, share with your battle buddies. Life changes, it moves on without you. Then you come home and realized your 12 yr old is now a young woman, you've missed birthdays, weddings, holidays, anniversaries, births of grandchildren, first kiss, first love, first date (not in that order). But sacrifices aren't enough. I'm still not good enough to serve my country.

So now I'm home & moving on.

Still working as a nurse. One of my 1st assignments was Walker's Point caring for Barbara Bush. George Bush Sr. and "Barbie" are an absolutely precious couple! Every night, George Jr. would call his mom & dad to share their days. Like every other American family. Life is all about family.

So my ride is coming to an end. Today, hold your family and don't forget to always say I love you! Life is too short!

Thanks James!

— Diana

13 May 2024 · Portland, ME → Gloucester, MA

Hello. My name is Dylin Knight. I'm headed to MA for an offshore fishing trip. It is Mother's Day, May 12th. I've been on dry land for over a year and am sad to leave all the friends I have made this past year for a week.

I honestly don't even know why I have any friends. It seems like the more of an asshole I am, the more popular I get. But I am thankful for every one of them.

If I leave on this trip and never come back, I want everyone to know that I thought about them to the last second.

— Dylin Knight · halibut fisherman

9 April · Portland, ME → Home

James — What a good time chatting today. It's always nice to talk to open-minded, educated people. I left a $125K+ a year job to become a teacher here in Maine. I make about $25K a year now but am the happiest I have ever been.

Now, kids these days still have issues from COVID. It’s weird — but kids don’t know how to talk to each other. They are way behind on pretty much everything. I tell my kids it’s the easiest time ever to excel at whatever you want, because no one tries.

— David · formerly managed several Otto’s Pizza stores

Boston area · voiced & digitized · date not recorded

I came here as an immigrant. I considered myself a traveler.

Now, after staying here for more than two decades, I would love to start my travels back. It is easy to be stagnant in a changing world.

Movement creates flutter. Movement enables relationships.

Here is to a person who helped me move. Thanks Jim.

India is my home city. America is my home country.

— Anonymous rider, Boston

Boston · voiced & digitized · date not recorded

Hey — Moving Sucks! Especially when you're moving from Boston to LA and you're 27 and have no idea what you're doing and have less than a thousand dollars in your bank account.

I confess, my boyfriend has a very steady job and is bankrolling the move, but I still don't feel great about that. I sorta don't feel like I deserve the life I'm living, since I'm only scratching out a living as a freelance digital painter and illustrator, and I'm too scared to go after real jobs at game studios like I really want.

My head hurts and I wish everyone would stop talking and leave me alone. But I do love that this anonymous journal is here where I can whine and complain for a while without feeling so very terrible.

I want to go home and eat a whole cake and have a 20-hour nap with my dog, but I've got to work and plan my move and be productive and good, so it will be a long time before I can relax.

— Anonymous · freelance digital painter, Boston → LA

Boston · voiced & digitized · date not recorded

Don’t ever forget to be happy. You can forget your keys or leave your glasses in the bathroom, but you should never forget to smile.

Never do anything to please others. You only have one shot at life — don’t waste it on people you don’t even like.

Spend time with people you enjoy being around, not the cool kids on the block. Be yourself. The people who care what you look like or what brand of clothing you’re wearing are not worth having as friends.

Only do what makes you happy. If you want something, go for it. Your best friend or your parents shouldn’t be able to convince you if you really want something.

So always keep doing what you’re doing as long as it keeps a smile on your face.

— A Wise 12 Year Old

30 August 2019 · Touring Downtown Boston

My name is Matthias.

This is my 3rd time in Boston, and each time I came for this girl, who turned out to be an amazing person and host — who I’ve started to like.

She’s sitting next to me and doesn’t realize how incredible she is.

You are your own worst critic.

— Matthias

4 July 2025 · Bethel, ME → Portland Jetport

Had a relaxing mini vacation with three fellow priests. Now heading back to the Dominican Republic, where I'm serving as a missionary, in a rural area on the border with Haiti.
I had an enriching conversation with my friend James, building on the dialogue that is ongoing between Christians and our elder brothers, the Jews.

— Father Stephen McGraw

DRIVER NOTES: Had a very productive discussion about Judaism & Christianity. He mentioned a book by Pope Benedict "Jesus of Nazareth" which refers to a book by Jacob Neusner "A Rabbi Talks w/ Jesus". I went to high school w/ Neusner's sons Sam & Eli.

28 July 2019 · Wingaersheek Beach → Watertown, MA

Today was the best day I've had in a long time. I moved here away from everyone and everything I love for an opportunity 2,500 miles from home. My boyfriend and I have been doing distance, and it's incredibly hard, but I love him. He flew all the way from Oregon to see me and I've realized what matters most to me in life … being surrounded by the people I love. I want forever with this man, home, close to my family, where we can start our own.

Sometimes, you'll never know how important something (or someone) is to you, until you have to let them go. If you can't stop thinking about them, go back and choose happiness and love. I did. ♥

— SMH

Her postscript (same page, lower):

"Don't visit Oregon unless you're prepared to move there." Everything you could possibly want is there. Also, Dutch Bros > Dunkin. Try Voodoo Donuts. If you're ever in Corvallis, Woodstocks is the best pizza. Blue Pool is a beautiful hike. Big Stuff BBQ in Cottage Grove is to die for. Note: I am a book cover model for romance novels. First appearance: Sleeping Mallow's Book

Boyfriend's reply (right page, inside a hand-drawn box at top):

The girlfriend has way better handwriting but summed up today perfect. 2,500 miles was worth the trip for us. Other than that, my brother played beer pong with Mark Zuckerberg.

— SMC