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THE DIARY OF AN UBER DRIVER

Stories from the Backseat of American Life

by

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Sample — 5 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?

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.