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Crosby's Footprint

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When I was growing up in Evanston, Illinois, in the 1950s and '60s, my mother often hauled me along when she ran errands around town. On many of these outings – in fact, this happened with remarkable regularity – she suddenly would tap my arm, point to a woman walking down the sidewalk, and exclaim in a triumphant voice, “There’s Mrs. Ubiquitous!” The first several times I simply assumed that my mother knew the woman. I thought maybe she was Greek, like our neighbor Mr. Demopoulos. One day I asked, “How do you know her?”

“I don’t,” said my mother.

“Then how do you know her name? Is she famous?”

“That’s not her real name. I call her that because *every* time I go out I see her. She’s everywhere.”

Thus do children learn the language. But I was skeptical. Eighty thousand people lived in Evanston. Chicago was only a few blocks south of where we lived, and other suburbs lay to the west and the north. There were just too many people around to keep seeing someone we didn’t even know. Eventually, though, I realized that it really was the same woman. These sightings continued for many years, even after I was old enough to drive by myself. It’s taken me awhile to fathom the mystery of Mrs. Ubiquitous. It’s taken knowing Crosby.

I met Crosby fifteen years ago, not long after he moved from the San Francisco
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bus.” I marveled at Crosby’s system of decision making, and even more at his risk taking.

Not long after my first encounter with Crosby I began to notice that, like Mrs. Ubiquitous, he was ubiquitous. Driving to the grocery store, the library, or the movies, I would often see him, invariably alone and on foot. I’d see him as I headed to one of my children’s school activities – and then usually see him there, too. A few times I stopped and offered him a lift, but he always declined. Once, in a passing conversation with him, I remarked how often I saw him walking. “Well,” he said, “I don’t own a car.” “Oh! Why not?” I asked, perhaps a bit too bluntly. He paused, and then said, “It would take awhile to explain. Maybe we could talk about it another time.” Later, I learned that Crosby walked two miles to work nearly every day, which took about half an hour. Every Sunday he walked to church, an equivalent distance.

Put off for the moment, I could only speculate why Crosby didn’t own a car. Was he afraid to drive? Did he have a condition that made driving unsafe? Had he been involved in an accident? Maybe he couldn’t afford a car.

Last April, Crosby and I finally had a chance to sit down and talk about it. I put the question to him again: “why don’t you own a car?” It turned out that none of my speculations was correct. Crosby’s answer was as rich and thoughtful as the question was simple and straightforward, although it began simply enough. He said, “I enjoy the physical activity of walking,” and contrasted this with the physical inactivity of sitting in a car. “In a car I get antsy, so there’s a negative aspect to it right off.”

“How about bicycles?” I asked.

“Bikes are OK, and I have a bike. I’ve even used it,” he said in a steady voice, “but I don’t trust bikes. They’re like cars.”

“What do you mean?”

“They can break down. I wouldn’t know how to fix either one, and I’d be stranded. I don’t want to rely on something else to get around. I don’t want a machine between me and the ground. I trust walking.”

“Another factor,” he went on, “goes back to my high school experience with the ‘car culture.’ People would ask what kind of car you had and then, based on that, they’d judge your whole character – and your importance.” The memory seemed to wring a wince out of Crosby. “And I rejected that.”

The automobile has indeed been part of the technology that undergirds American popular culture for a long time now. Like telephones, radios, televisions, computers, and now cell phones, we expect everyone to have one. But while we don’t much care what *kind* of telephone or computer anyone else has, we often take note of the make of their car. Witness the thinly veiled animosity that exists between Hummer and Prius owners, or the special admiration expected by (and usually accorded to) the possessor of a new Porsche, or the line demarcating cool and uncool cars in high schools. Why do we read so much into the kind of car a person drives?

Crosby’s rejection of his high school’s car culture has grown into a larger point for him today. “U.S. society is over dominated by and over dependent on cars, and I decided I did not want to be part of that, although I do have a driver’s license for emergencies. I guess not owning a car is like a protest.” Crosby is protesting more, though, than simply the salience of cars in American popular culture. Most of his ire is

aimed at the problems cars cause. To begin with, he points out the many minor annoyances, like fighting traffic, wasting time looking for parking places, spending money on tune-ups and other service work, keeping cars looking clean, having to renew licenses, experiencing the inconvenience of flat tires, and so on.

Then there are more serious problems. “Even at low speeds cars can have accidents. Repairs are expensive, and that requires a massive auto insurance industry. And of course a lot of people get killed and injured in car accidents.” According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Admini

pedestrian is freer to focus on the walk itself, the passing scene – the landscape, the buildings, the people, the birds, other animals, the gardens, the sounds and sights. The senses are more fully engaged, and the act of locomotion is more of a living bridge between the walker and his or her environment. There are choices of a different kind, connections of a different kind, spontaneity of a different kind. As for convenience, its main virtue seems closely tied to the ego. The car culture is tightly bound to conscious purpose. Walking is more conditional, more circumstantial.

Crosby's insight that walking is a process and is about connecting is linked to another criticism he levels at cars: "I see them leading to a degradation of community. When the interstates were built is when the small towns in Iowa started to decline. People concentrated more in the cities, and the ones who remain in the small towns more often drive to cities, to where the 'stuff' is, and small towns lose their economic grounding. I blame that on cars.

"I wanted to live in a small town where I could walk. I'm more likely to talk to people in a smaller town because I'll know them, or at least recognize them. When I'm walking I'm more likely to say 'hi' to people. I know people in cars do that, too; they honk and wave, and if they're teenagers 'scooping the loop' they may even stop and talk. But you can do it everywhere and more easily when you're walking. This is another aspect of community: people getting to know each other because they keep running into each other." It occurred to me that I probably would not have been sitting talking to Crosby if he wasn't a walker. It also occurred to me that my mother and I never met Mrs. Ubiquitous because we weren't.

The sins of automobiles are thus numerous. They lead to environmental degradation and costly foreign policy decisions. They are costly in other ways, as well. They also take lives. Cars insinuate themselves into our personas while at the same time separating us from one another. They erode community. They lead us to focus more on arriving than on the journey, more on destination than process, more on ends than on means. So Crosby rejects automobiles in favor of auto-mobility.

"Then is your decision to walk due more to a dislike of cars than to a particularly positive feeling about walking?" I asked him. "I like the act of walking, the physical movement," he reiterated. However, I don't think of it as a form of exercise, which is what a lot of people think when they hear that I walk. For me, walking is like breathing. Maybe that's why I talked more at first about what I didn't like about cars than what I did like about walking. For me, walking is natural."

"Are there things you enjoy about walking besides the physical part?"

"Oh yes, a variety of things. When I walk to work it's often dark, so sometimes I do meditative stuff focused on breathing. Sometimes I daydream. When it's light out sometimes I read. I can concentrate better when I'm walking than, say, in a coffee shop. I tend not to get distracted as much when I walk."

"Isn't that's dangerous?"

"There *is* a danger in walking, and that's ice in winter. Of course, that can be a problem for cars, too. It can be worse when people shovel their sidewalks because it can lead to ice on the walk.."

"Are there other negatives about walking?"

“I have to be careful not to stop too long to look at a house in case people would think I’m a Peeping Tom. I’ve read in the police reports in the newspaper things like, ‘Suspicious person: man walking on the highway,’ and I think of myself. What makes that person suspicious: just because he’s on foot? That always upsets me. If you were to drive from town to town you wouldn’t be accused of vagrancy, but if you were to walk from town to town you could be, even though all you’re doing is using a different form of transportation. It’s because of our car culture, because society doesn’t think of walking or biking for transportation as legitimate. As a society we could promote walking much more than we do.”

“Do you engage in any advocacy on behalf of walking?”

“I’m aware of advocacy groups and know they are doing things. I haven’t gotten involved that way, but there’s an implicit advocacy in what I do. People know I walk, so I’m advocating with action. What I would like to see is an actual ‘pedestrian community.’ We wouldn’t do away with cars; they’d just become a lesser component of a more diversified transportation system. There would be more public transportation, and a lot more walking.”

I have known about Crosby’s walking habit c o . 0 0 e l y 2 7 T e c c 1

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picked Crosby up on his way home at the end of the day. “I’d say my neighbor had to drive an extra ten miles on my account that day. Fortunately, I wasn’t selected. I don’t know what I would have done if I had been. That’s the only time I can think of in the last ten years that someone drove out of their way for me.” Crosby walks, rides a bicycle, and uses roller blades, but has not ridden on a train or a bus or flown in an airplane “since the last century” (i.e., since before 2000). His carbon footprint for transportation in the last ten years is effectively zero.

Other of Crosby’s activities did generate

