

DEATH OF THE CAR(GO) CULT(URE)

I had an epiphany recently. It sneaked up on me, right about the time I let go of my comfortable illusion of middle-class security and embraced the fact I may be faced with more than \$26,000 per year in health care premiums and untold thousands in out-of-pocket deductibles and medication expenses. It could be more than my household income, forcing me to draw down on retirement savings nearly ten years prematurely.

Ticking off monthly expenses – what things could be reduced or eliminated in my household to make up for the additional health care expenses if some mutant abomination of AHCA passes – I came to an abrupt conclusion.

I don't need a car anymore.

It costs more to own a car at my personal disposal than calling a car-for-hire, whether Uber or Lyft or local cab service.

I had to sit down after that. For nearly fifty years I've thought I needed a car, that every American aspired to vehicle ownership, save for big city residents for whom cars would be unmanageable. My entrance to adulthood was marked by the ability to drive a car; my personal freedom hinged upon being able to get away in my own vehicle.

But now? I might be trapped by a car. My six-year-old grocery-getter Mom mobile cost me more than I invested in the stock market the year it was manufactured – it's worth a fraction of its original value, while my stock is worth several times over. My investment in wheels won't pay for my future health.

I thought about my kids and the reality they face; only four years separates these two siblings, but a massive cultural shift occurred between them. My 23-year-old daughter drove off like the wind when I gave her my car keys seven

years ago; she saw her first vehicle as freedom, just as I did when I was her age. She just signed her first lease on a vehicle, though; after crunching the numbers on new cars, it didn't make sense to buy one. Leasing a car would yield a lower total cost to operate than buying one. She's also not stuck with trying to sell it in a couple years when an electric vehicle might be preferred.

This isn't an earth-shattering shift, but it's a tectonic move; no one in my family has ever leased a vehicle. We have always bought and owned them over the last four generations.

And now my son. One might assume he was a car buff living here in the backyard of the Big Three Automakers, the progeny of one family which made its fortunes in auto parts and spawn of another family in which two successive generations made a living engineering in automobile manufacturing.

But no – he dragged his feet for nearly three years getting his license. He just didn't care to get it; the only reason he got a driver's permit was that everyone else his age had done so. He had the public school bus to get him to class every day, and me to get him to every intramural event. Why should he bother when he had it so good?

Especially when it came to the annoying expense of having his own vehicle. Being in a high-risk group – male, 16-25, driving more than 25 miles a week – he might pay more in insurance each year than the purchase price of the car he would drive. And then gas, which was near \$4.00/gallon when he got his permit. And car washes, tires, wipers, oil changes, other increasingly frequent car repairs, and so on...this was not freedom.

His sister had been fortunate to land an internship for the duration of her college career, which helped defray automobile expenses. This has not been the case for her brother because of their different academic pursuits. He works at a summer job, stashing as much of his

paycheck away for the academic year while living on his tips during the season. The paycheck and tips combined from his summer service job do not equal the amount his sister made each year; he simply cannot afford a car of his own.

We don't know how long this may be the case, either. His prospects are different from his sister's given his field of study. He may need to pursue a master's degree immediately after he gets his bachelor's. Leads on internships for his junior year of college are good, but the pay may be less than his sister made at the same point in their studies. A car of his own is a very iffy prospect for years.

Let's face it: my son's life is closer to that of the overwhelming number of American's his age than my daughter's is to her cohort. This is the shift in our culture, one in which we begin to let go of personal and family automobiles as a norm.

The more I thought about it, the more disturbed I became. Both of my kids will leave college without any debt; I spent what should probably have been my retirement health care savings on their tuition and board. In contrast, my prospective son-in-law carries \$40,000 in debt after his graduation this month. Thankfully he has a good job and can pay it down quickly, but what of all other college students in the U.S.? The overwhelming majority will be saddled with a similar or greater amount of debt and middling jobs. They're part of nearly 50% of America which cannot muster \$400 cash in the event of an emergency, perhaps part of the 53% participating in the stock market but still one of the precarious.

These youngsters will be hard pressed to juggle health insurance premiums and deductibles under AHCA with massive college tuition debt and rising rents.

They will be hard pressed to buy a car outright. Screw all of those idiotic "Millennials are killing everything!" opinion pieces; their

parents and grandparents have done little to ensure college would not burden them as much or more than an automobile payment.

Or a mortgage. I realized, too, that I am financing and paying taxes on a garage and a driveway I rarely use. I must trek out and shovel tons of snow every year to keep that rarely-used driveway clean; when it's too much to do by hand, I break out the gas-guzzling, exhaust-belching snowblower.

All in service to a rapidly depreciating fossil-fueled demi-god with a deteriorating finish and in need of an oil change. I've become an adherent of a cargo cult, who has for too long believed that possessing this object would yield some greater blessing from the great god of capitalism. Instead of throwing several handfuls of dollars per mile traveled into a gaping maw I should be riding my bike or taking a bus.

When the rest of the U.S. wakes up to this same reality, the real earth-shattering shift will begin. Perhaps it already has.

What happens to a people when they lose their religion? We're about to find out.

Food for thought:

U.S. automakers question possible excess capacity – but is the challenge too much manufacturing capacity or too little buyers' capacity due to decades of stagnant wages?

If carmakers like Volvo are already committed to switching completely to electric while entire cities and countries are forcing fossil fuel's phase out, are potential car buyers simply driving their gas guzzlers to death until the industry has completely migrated?

Or maybe the future isn't on the road but in the air; will buyers save their pennies for a flying car?