

TORONTO STAR op-ed page
Monday July 28, 2008

It wasn't easy, but I kicked the car habit

Beth Kaplan

Two years ago, driving my silver hatchback to its new owners, I burst into tears. From now on, I would not have the convenience and luxurious privacy of my own metal box on wheels. I would not be able to zoom about the city in a bubble of my favourite sounds, in a climate adjusted specifically for me. I would be out in the elements, alone and unprotected.

I almost changed my mind and turned back.

The grateful new owners drove me home. A young couple from Bosnia with a small child and complicated work schedules, they needed a car far more than I did. In anticipation of their gain and my loss, I had motored around the last few days, getting in heavy things – bags of birdseed and potatoes, a futon that I'd managed to cram into the back. Because from then on, buying birdseed and futons would be considerably more complicated.

I'd like to say that I got rid of my car simply to help save the planet, but it's not true. First, I couldn't justify the expense any more. Now that I was no longer needed as shuttle bus driver for my kids and their friends, the cost for me alone was way too high.

In any case, my house and job are downtown. Even when the hatchback was parked right outside, I often left it there and walked half a block to the streetcar. Yes, partly to save the planet, but mostly because parking was so difficult and costly, and driving was so bloody infuriating. I was angry all the time at aggressive, thoughtless cellphone jabbering drivers, giant show-off SUV's and stupid, thoughtless parkers taking up more space than they needed. City driving was bad for my peace of mind. And to visit elsewhere in Ontario, I preferred to get the bus or train, so I could put up my feet and arrive rested.

The last straw came the second time someone smashed my right front window in the middle of the night. Enough, I decided. Time to try living carless.

But for a while after the sale, I felt vulnerable and hard done by, convinced I'd made a big mistake.

Luckily, I'm a big fan of bicycles, one of humankind's greatest inventions. Despite being hit once by a car – my fault, speeding through an intersection on a yellow light – it's still a pleasure whenever possible to zoom about the city on my powder blue bike. How smug I feel, sailing past a line of steaming cars caught in a jam. If it's not the right day for the bike, I take the streetcar or subway, using the wait time to read and people-watch. And after calculating the thousands I save each year by not owning a car, I treat myself regularly to cabs – often, in the bargain, enjoying a conversation with new immigrants to this country.

When a car is essential, I can get one easily, thanks to AutoShare. Like its rival Zipcar, this nifty organisation has cars parked all over the city, allowing its members to slide behind the wheel of a vehicle not long after deciding to rent one. Yes, it's not my very own silver steed waiting at the front door. There are days – snowy days, rainy days, plain weary days – when I wish I could just slam a car door and turn a key, safe and warm. My shoulders ache sometimes from the tension of biking, avoiding lethal car doors, streetcar tracks and speeders. There are friends in the far reaches of the city I rarely visit now, because it's just too hard to get there.

The good news is that I have discovered an effective new diet: the Carless Weight Loss Plan, which involves getting trim and fit by biking, walking, and carrying potatoes and birdseed home in a backpack. I enjoy shopping in my own neighbourhood and I'm relieved at not having to maintain an incomprehensibly complicated machine.

Life, for this downtown resident, is blessedly simpler without a car. I have not only saved money, I have saved energy, tranquillity and time.

And also, in a very small way, this beautiful, generous, patient, depleted planet.