

Kicking the Car Habit; What's life like without wheels in San Francisco? - Gwen Knapp,
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The accident left me completely turned around. Someone rear-ended my Honda Civic on Interstate 80 near Lake Tahoe, and by the time my car stopped spinning, I was pinned against a snowbank on the shoulder, facing the wrong way, staring at oncoming traffic. I took a deep breath and waited for more spinning, more damage, another terrifying jolt from a car. Nothing happened.

I looked around slowly, first at myself to make sure that no bones had broken and no blood had spilled, then at the traffic to determine whether my car was still in the line of fire. No, I told myself, it's all over. I'm alive and likely to stay that way. I didn't even care that the car looked like a goner. I was that giddy with relief. The people who hit me were very kind. Nobody yelled. We all sat in my car until the police came, and somebody dug into my grotesquely disfigured trunk and pulled out my laptop, still in perfect health. Not only had I survived, but so had the file with the first half of my Sunday sports column. I wouldn't have to resurrect a word. Life was good.

Later, my doctor told me my buzz probably came from a mild concussion. But for weeks afterward, I still felt a little high, relieved of my 40- something complacency, eager to try something new. I decided to convert the demise of my car into a challenge.

In the months before the accident, I had discovered the uncanny allure of riding the bus, partly because of Tom Ammiano's transit-advocacy in his mayoral campaign, partly due to parking-space woes. I liked the idea of conserving gas and sampling city life in its pure form. I loved not looking for a parking space downtown. Still, I didn't have the guts, or the inclination, to divorce myself from the car.

I had always been an automotive addict. I didn't need anything fancy, but I needed four wheels. I had terrifying visions about the day when old age might force me out of the driver's seat. They began when I was 25.

Could I now live without a car in San Francisco? Could I adjust to Muni's schedule and, when necessary, lean on other people for rides? I am a firstborn, and firstborns don't like relying on anyone else. We prefer to be the people in charge.

But what if the car didn't represent independence or control? What if it was a trap, a modern convenience that had become a necessity because I was too coddled to imagine life without it? I wanted to test myself, to know if, in midlife, I had the flexibility to undergo a radical change. I also wanted to test the elected officials who incessantly preach "transit first, transit first." Did the city have what it took to keep me out of a dealer's showroom?

Car ownership cost me a minimum of \$60 a week, so I could devote at least that much to cab rides, car rentals and transit fares. I turned my insurance settlement over to one of my sisters so she could buy her first house and joined City CarShare, the rent-by-the-hour outfit that poured a fleet of green VW Beetles onto San Francisco's streets. Now, like a privileged teenager embarking

on an Outward Bound trip, I was ready for my big adventure.

"You won't last six months," a friend said.

At One with the Bus

Of all the obstacles, I knew the biggest would be my personality. A control freak does not belong on Muni. To ride the bus in San Francisco, you must give up \$1.25 in exact change and all hope that your journey will proceed in any fashion that you might recognize as orderly. All you can control is your temper.

About a month into my experiment, I found myself on a 30-Stockton bus that came to a standstill in Chinatown because the bus driver refused to move until two women in the front stopped yelling at each other. The bus was so packed, I couldn't even see them. I desperately wanted the driver to let them work it out on their own, until I heard one of the women screaming and realized that they were hurling ethnic slurs, debating who came from superior immigrant stock.

"Your people came here on a boat. Mine took a plane."

Later, I described the incident to a friend, who had already come up with the perfect interpretation of Muni: "It's not public transit. It's performance art."

Almost every trip, I see riders exit from the front of the bus, where they will almost certainly block people who are trying to board, and I seethe. Don't they listen to the announcements telling them to exit in the back? How can they not know that they are delaying the progress of the bus, holding up 30, 40 maybe even 50 people?

I did the math once and figured out that if the typical bus is delayed two minutes per run by this one breach of etiquette, an average rider could lose an entire day of his or her life every two years. I did a lot of this math after I gave up the car, counting lost minutes like a miser balancing a checkbook. For example, trips across town that used to take 15 minutes now require at least 45. Traveling to see my friends in east Oakland can eat up an hour and 15 minutes each way. In a car on a good traffic day, the trip would take less than a half-hour.

It came to my attention that calculating all of my lost time cost me a lot of time. I couldn't help it. This is what control freaks do, and I could only break one addiction at a time.

When I joined City CarShare, I loved the whole idea, the charm of the Beetles, the vaguely hip quality imparted by membership in an environmentally conscious, avant-garde organization. I fully expected City CarShare to be the centerpiece of my experiment. I couldn't have been more wrong.

While Muni expected me to yield control, City CarShare pushed in the opposite direction. Managing car rentals by the hours demanded more discipline than I will ever have. If I rented for three hours, I needed four. If I reserved for 4 p.m., I invariably discovered that 5:30 would work

much better. I spent so much time making reservations that walking began to seem more efficient.

The computerized voice from the phone reservations system haunted me. In the exasperating, ever-expanding field of digitally generated personalities, this one stood out. I'd say "March 7 at 2 p.m.," and the voice would chirp back: "May 22 at noon." No matter how much it was screwing up my life, the voice always called to mind a prim, endlessly cheerful homemaker from a 1960s commercial. I yelled at her a lot.

I once sat in a restaurant parking lot with friends, trying to extend my reservation so we could go in and eat. The Stepford wife cut me off before the final stage, failing to confirm that the car was mine. I had no idea if I could keep it or not. We gave up on the restaurant and returned the car.

I understand the reservations system has improved dramatically since then, but I quit after realizing that taxis and regular rental cars worked better. Picking up a rental became an adventure all its own. I never knew what kind of car I would get. One day, the agent handed me the keys to a Toyota Prius, and I became the quintessential Bay Area lefty, an environmentally conscious consumer. Another time I got behind the wheel of a Mustang convertible, and I knew I was supposed to become a flashy party girl. I wasn't up to the challenge. I listened to NPR and drove the speed limit. The top never came down.

That was nothing compared to the time I very reluctantly accepted a huge SUV. I was completely disoriented, and so were the drivers around me. I disturbed the rhythm of the freeway by being too deferential. When I slowed down to let a smaller car merge, the other driver would slow down even more. When I struggled to fit into a parking space, I was certain that I saw pedestrians rolling their eyes. Why is she driving that monstrosity if she can't even handle it? I wanted to post a sign in the rear window: This is not my car.

A cab ride is my escape from it all, a spa treatment on four wheels. I don't have to park. I don't have to resist homicidal urges toward fellow bus passengers who crack their gum or exit in the front. I don't have to do anything except pay the fare, which, like all luxuries, comes with sticker shock. San Francisco's cab prices went up shortly after my car wreck, becoming the highest in the country. A round trip from my apartment to downtown jumped to \$24. I allow myself about four cab trips a week, and they make car-free living bearable. Subsisting on a diet of Muni, BART and Caltrain would be impossible. I know people do it; I just don't know how. The system operates fairly efficiently for commuters, ferrying them downtown when their employers need them. But if you work off-hours (like, say, a sportswriter), or expect to leave your San Francisco neighborhood on a Sunday, you're in a public-transit wilderness, living off the grid.

One cold, damp evening at Third and Market, I became so annoyed by a tardy bus that I scanned the faces of other would-be passengers to see if they were equally agitated. No one looked upset. These were people of limited means, with scruffy beards, discolored coats and plastic bags functioning as purses. Their faces registered exhaustion, boredom and, most of all, resignation. I was struggling with the temptation to hail a cab. They were simply struggling.

After a wait of 27 minutes, for a route allegedly operating on 10-minute intervals, I gave up. The other passengers didn't blink, and that made me doubly uncomfortable as I climbed into a taxi, realizing that they were so accustomed to being left behind.

Three Years No Regrets

On March 23, I marked three years as a carless person. Has it been a good deal? In strict terms, no. It's the most inefficient thing I've done in my life, chewing up huge chunks of my time. But in those three years, I have never seriously considered turning back. Impending service cuts on Muni might change my mind, but I doubt it. Overall, the decision to give up a car has changed my life for the better.

I am more patient now, more aware of how the city works and how it fails. I feel more in control, not less, because I am no longer dependent on a car. Occasionally, I worry about how I'd leave town if a natural disaster hit, but that concern is more than offset by an exemption from anxiety over rising gas prices. Because of all the cab rides, my bank account isn't much fatter, but running after Muni, or giving up on it altogether and walking, has made my calves substantially stronger. I knew I was hooked six months into the experiment, when a friend went out of town and lent me a car for a week. As I walked to its parking space one day, I listened wistfully to the 30-Stockton whooshing along the street and yearned to climb aboard.

Over time, the bus came to seem more relaxing than a car. The sound of a quarter rattling down the throat of the fare box signaled a transfer of responsibility from me to the driver. I had handed off the snarled intersections, the premature right-turners-on-red, the straddlers of two lanes, the profoundly turn-signal-challenged. "All of them," I said wordlessly to the driver, "are your problem now."

I dream of the day when anyone, from the city to the suburbs, can make the same choice I did. I don't expect it to happen in my lifetime, because owning a car, no matter how burdensome, is a hard habit to kick.

The other day, as I walked briskly along Bay Street, a woman drove slowly alongside me, searching desperately for parking. "Are you going to your car?" she asked hopefully.

"No," I said, trying to sound sympathetic. "I don't have one." And I kept walking.