

# DECLINE OF THE AUTOMOBILE

Essay and photographs

by Bill Scheffel ©



*I hurled myself toward my personal god: Simplicity.  
- Charles Bukowski.*

I sold my last automobile six years ago and I hope to never own another one. After I'd taken the car away from him, I drove my father's car intermittently over these last couple of years, but I sold it too. Studebaker, Mercury Comet, Dodge Coronet, Toyota Camry: middle-class cars of the American dream. Thousands of pounds of steel and vinyl. Untold gallons of gas. Countless oil changes. Dead batteries. A couple of speeding tickets. Exhaust.

A car is an easy thing to get. My dad had a hard time accepting I was going to sell my car, go car-less at age fifty-one. He said I could never borrow his car (even though he lived two blocks away and used it every other day). Even said he'd pay me to keep owning a car. I told him, "Dad, there's 400 million cars on the planet, I can always get another one if I need to." Once I sold my car he insisted I could borrow his whenever I wanted to (I only borrowed it twice).

My son has never owned a car, has hardly ever even driven one (though he drives reasonable well). My dad recognized the problems with cars, he certainly accepted the issues of global warming, but driving his automobile was as essential to him as reading, both occupations he could do in quiet solitude. I was always at war with the car. In my formative years, Joni Mitchell songs about paving paradise overshadowed the notion of the car as anything other than doomsday machine. I understood cars were toxic just as I understood cigarettes were. I smoked for a number of years, but I knew cigarettes were deadly long before the Surgeon General's statement came printed on the box.

My son is post-automobile in the way Jackson Pollock was post-modern. It's a kind of instinct, a need to throw paint. A different use of the body. In terms of the body, driving a car was one of the ways I damaged mine, forced it into unnatural positions and long periods of confinement (sitting at a desk was another). My dad held up well under the car's influence. He never had an accident, never neglected routine maintenance, never stopped driving until forced to. He drove semi-demented and nearly deaf until age eighty-seven, kind of like the Japanese who never heard WWII ended and kept themselves hidden and fully armed in the Philippine jungles. You had to pry the keys from my father's hand whereas I'd have given them to you in a second. My son hardly knows what a set of car keys feels like.

They say life begins at forty, but mine began at fifty - when I sold my car. I know now I could have sold it a decade earlier, given myself an additional ten good years. I'm not here to criticize others or claim going carless is for everyone, even if everyone could. Most of us still have little choice in the matter of driving. We haven't put in place the options, any more than we've erected windmills or cut-back on air-conditioning (also an easy thing to live without). I'm here to share the possibility of giving up the car for those who can, who want to, who need to; for those who dream of it, for those who are being destroyed by it.

There are reasons besides "global warming" to give up the car (we know the production of beef generates as much CO<sub>2</sub> per carnivore; I know flying in aircraft makes me still every bit the commuter). We have to examine the automobile as environment, what it does to our space. We have to examine the automobile as violence, what it does to others space. And we have to imagine the alternative paradigm: what could we become without one?

Step back to a farthest perspective: time. The most commonplace knowledge tells us the automobile saves time: If I drive I'm at work in twenty minutes, if I walk it'll take me two hours. What we don't realize is the automobile *uses up time*. Even if cars go electric, as long as we generate electricity with fossil fuels (or power cars directly with them) we are using up non-renewable resources. The millions of years (of dying, decomposing plant life) that it took to create our coal reserves, tar sand pits, and petroleum deposits is being used up almost instantly (the start of the industrial revolution to now).

We are using up time, using up the possibilities of certain types of life on this planet (time is running out). If murder means to use up all of another person's time instantly, cars are tools of homicide - as are power lawn movers and leaf blowers (snub-nosed 38s compared to the assault rifle).

Once he entered his 80s, I was always afraid my dad would kill someone with his car. He drove so slowly there was little danger he would kill himself, but he could take out a bicyclist in a second (I saw him nearly do it more than a few times) or splatter a pedestrian in a heartbeat. His supreme confidence in his own abilities must have brought down a form of luck, as if certain kinds of hubris actually please the gods. His only havoc was to sometimes scrape the side of another car when he pulled from a parking space (since he couldn't hear the scrape he had no idea he'd made one). The state of Colorado flattered him by issuing a ten-year valid drivers license with no physical exam when he was eighty-six. Yet he complained, "What will I do when this expires!"

Before the days of MADD and the laws they gradually helped enact I would occasionally drive so drunk I saw double. Once I drove from Oakland to San Francisco this way. Yet the times I've momentarily fallen asleep driving (always in the afternoon, never while drinking) are far more chilling remembrances. What gods were smiling then? A couple of weeks after I sold my car I made a list of the benefits of doing so. While I admitted to myself I could easily be killed riding my bicycle (I was now doing much more of it) at least I wouldn't kill anyone else. Not with a car anyway.

It took me a long time to understand how devastating it was to take my father's car away from him (I'm only now beginning to understand). Curiously, my father drove into his own trap. He forgot where his doctor's office was and drove to the emergency room instead. Once there, the triage nurse recognized both his dementia and the near-crime of his driving. The nurse called me and said my father had no business ever driving again and I must come down and pick up him. He was angry at *me*, I could tell. I hung up the phone and nearly fell to my knees, the moment I'd been praying for had come - for I knew if I tried to take my father's keys away he'd never have forgive me.

My father's doctor was called in to explain it: "Bill, you'll never drive again" he told my dad. I nodded in agreement. The doctor said it again, I nodded again. He said it a third time - each of the three times my father's expression of refusal grew darker. We left the office. The classic stages of loss-grief had begun within my father but I had no way of knowing that then. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance: these gods cannot be denied. My father's depression had already begun. Denial lasted four months (ended with him following me out onto street, screaming at me). Bargaining, like death, came without warning, "Just let me drive to the bank once in a while" he'd plead. Acceptance seemingly came only when he longer could seldom remember he'd ever owned a car: Alzheimer's.

I see how we all face the unforeseen series of events that deny or take away our seeming autonomy (the events always occurring, the autonomy always seeming). My father's narrative was his own and he was as entitled to it as anyone. A car was like a cigarette (he smoked until forty-five) or a book - something to be alone with, in control of, in communion thereby. To quietly examine his freshly-waxed, well-maintained Toyota Camry parked there (in a spotless garage). To Drive a two-lane highway through the desert with sage brush growing and a thunderstorm sky. A simple ride to Safeway for toilet paper and a head of cauliflower. All of it beautiful, an expression of peace. All of it gone with the car keys gone.

My several year-long joy of liberating myself from the automobile overlapped my father's reluctant journey of giving it up. It wasn't the first time my enthusiasm confronted his gloom and it was natural though impatient of me to more or less say, "Get over it, Dad." Fortunately a guardian angel came into his life, just weeks after his Camry left it. Annette was a fifty-two year old nurse from Tennessee, working temporarily for an elder-care agency and born on the same day as my mother. Born also with the sense of humor necessary to survive her life story (another story) and my father's humor. Annette found every ounce of my fathers sardonic gloom and semi self-effacing sarcasm amusing. Everything he said made her laugh. And even though he couldn't hear some of what Annette said, he could recognize that she loved him and loved his company. I hired Annette to take my dad on long drives twice a week, which he of course could hardly wait to do (an example of my optimism trumping his pessimism).

In May, 2005 my father was still driving and I was preparing to sell my own car. I'd placed the ad in the newspaper. Someone called, took the test drive, brought it to her mechanic, gave me a cashiers check for seven grand, drove away in my former 1999, Toyota Corolla. The next day I woke up, walked out of my house and stared at the empty driveway. The automobile was gone, in its place a vacancy, a complete absence of vehicle. The driveway was black, buckled, the sun was already heating it, the ants were out. I felt depressed, worthless, vacated - like I had a hole in me. I went inside, got dressed, ate breakfast, put my shoes on. I walked across the driveway and all the way into town. I got coffee in town and did whatever else I did. Then I walked home. I never missed my car again.

A few years before I turned fifty I began to realize that life was asking me for greater simplicity, that I was heading toward an inevitable and steeper downward slope (downward because I could not escape it). In answer to the question, How do you know you are making progress on the spiritual path, I heard a Buddhist teacher once reply, *That you have more devotion and you've simplified your life.*

Selling my car was the sacrifice the dralas requested, the single most significant offering to simplicities' god one could make. In return I bought

less, shopped less (or more carefully). My legs strengthened, I took fresh air, had periodic epiphanies as I passed by cattail marshes or walked in heavy rain. Strange privileges and tremendous good fortune came my way. I walked across the cities I visited, New Orleans, Paris, Kuala Lumpur. One's cosmic insignificance became vivified walking alone in a city of fourteen million (in which I knew no one at all). Cultural history poured into me though I seldom entered a museum or read a book. In Cambodia, because I spent a good deal of time there, I (temporarily) learned how to walk: more slowly, without haste, tutored by the Cambodians. I encountered the archetype of pedestrian: present-tense, insignificant, alert, gauging and traversing the thin planetary membrane of life we walk upright upon. In this time, a pleasure on the edge of species collapse and other realities of a changing planet.

Now I have arrived in Mendota Heights, a town on the edge of St. Paul. My friend Lisa picked me up at the Minneapolis Airport in a 1939 GM LaSalle. A friend of Lisa's who restores cars loaned it to her and now she wants to buy it. The car is almost like an Elvis sighting. One encounters an iconic image from the vast collection of inner images our automobile culture has supplied us with. It is a sculpture of bulging fenders and an upholstered interior so large it's a more comfortable and elegant living room than the one in Lisa's home. It is a superbly crafted impunity tool with three sets of ashtray, eight spark plugs and a 126 inch wheelbase. It is a beautiful dream, American. A white-walled room big enough for sex and raising a family in. It's a dream-totem animal, the seed-syllable of the interstate system Eisenhower installed that became the foundation of the military-industrial complex he later warned us about. Thousands of miles of grassland and forest were cleared then asphalted to create a pasture big enough for the GM LaSalle.

Years ago, I realized it was time to sell my own car when a black dumptruck loaded with sand nearly hit me from behind. I saw the near-miss in my rearview mirror. Strangely, I'd seen two black dumptrucks earlier that day. It was a cluster of omens that underscored a gradual discovery: that driving shredded my nervous system. Even driving the two miles to *Office Depot* for a cartridge of printer ink left me feeling awful, as if some part of me rode underneath the car scraping asphalt. So I wasn't entirely at ease getting into Elvis - the '39 LaSalle - much less riding without a seatbelt. But Lisa had arrived in a car that drove straight into my story and the decline of the automobile could not have been made clearer than the experience of riding in this one.

