

Sometimes, Perspective Changes Everything

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – May 19, 2013

Single and lonely in a new neighborhood, a guy invites his neighbors to a drop-in party. With ample food and drink, he sits alone as party time comes and goes. Finally, he hears a knock. He runs excitedly to the door, but finds no one there. Puzzled and dejected, he closes the door and walks away, when he hears another knock. Again he opens to an empty porch. As he shuts the door, he hears another tap.

This time, he sees a tiny snail on the brass door knocker. With a flick of his index finger, he sends the tiny gastropod hurtling across the yard. The evening ends with no party guests.

A year passes. One day there's a knock at the door. The same snail is perched on the door knocker, looking quite perturbed. "What the hell was that all about!?" he asks.

Credit (or blame) for the joke goes to my cousin-in-law Dennis in Chicago. I remembered it on a recent walk, when I became entangled in an invisible spider web. Stepping briskly and rubbing the sticky strands from my face, I saw a quarter-inch-sized spider crawling on my left hand. Instinctively brushing him away, I looked back to see the poor fellow bouncing along behind me, still bound by his web to my hand. By the time I separated us, he was some 30 paces from where he'd peacefully existed before I blew up his world.

I thought of the snail. Like him, this unfortunate spider faced a long road back to the life he once knew -- if he ever found it at all.

Perspective is everything. My experience was quite different from the spider's. In a less mindful moment, I wouldn't have noticed him at all.

Consider the last time you drove through the Covington Square. Chances are you fussed about traffic backing up at Monticello and Washington streets. Or, you were frustrated circling only to find parking on the far side from where you were headed.

Now, suppose instead you walked to the Square. You might feel as tiny and insignificant as a snail or a spider when venturing from narrow, crowded sidewalks, across four lanes of car space (two for travel, two for parking), to reach the Square Park. Our Square is a magnificent space. But, the park is an island engulfed by a sea of asphalt teeming with circling sharks of steel, glass, and rubber. Like most of America, its evolution has been shaped by car-centric culture – at the expense of walking, biking, and other self-propelled transport. Until recently, there weren't even crosswalks to the center.

Perhaps you say “so what? You like the Square just as it is. But, a significant shift is taking place quietly across America. Our car-centric culture is changing, and numbers suggest that change will stick.

“Young Americans lead trend to less driving,” reported the New York Times this week, citing a report by the non-profit US PIRG Education Fund.

For several years, US PIRG and the Frontier Group have cited 2004 as the pivot point when America’s 60-year “driving boom” ended. The most recent report “A New Direction: Our Changing Relationship with Driving and the Implications for America’s Future,” shows the drop in driving levels continued in 2012. And, the authors make compelling points for why they believe the shift is permanent.

US Department of Transportation data shows average miles driven per person fell last year to levels not seen since 1996. Millennials (those born 1983 to 2000), drove even less – declining by 23% over one eight-year period. All Americans are impacted by recession and high gasoline prices, but 16 to 30-year-olds are also engaged with technologies that make it easier to connect to work and friends with less travel. And they increasingly prefer transit, biking, and walking when they do move about. Approaching their prime earning and purchasing years, these young people show a clear, measurable desire to live in walkable, bikable communities near transit.

You may not care now, but in coming years, this generation will buy our homes, acquire our businesses, and generate the economic activity to sustain our community. Then again, maybe they won’t. We can keep spending every dime of our transportation funding on more roads for more cars, or we can invest in a more livable, walkable community to draw and keep future generations here.

Just as I was aware of that spider, think about that 16 to 30-year-old next time you drive through the Square. Perspective changes everything.

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