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Crosby's Footprint

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When I was growing up in Evanston, Illinois, in the 1950s and '60s, my mother often hauled me along when she ran errands around town. On many of these outings – in fact, this happened with remarkable regularity – she suddenly would tap my arm, point to a woman walking down the sidewalk, and exclaim in a triumphant voice, “There’s Mrs. Ubiquitous!” The first several times I simply assumed that my mother knew the woman. I thought maybe she was Greek, like our neighbor Mr. Demopoulos. One day I asked, “How do you know her?”

“I don’t,” said my mother.

“Then how do you know her name? Is she famous?”

“That’s not her real name. I call her that because *every* time I go out I see her. She’s everywhere.”

Thus do children learn the language. But I was skeptical. Eighty thousand people lived in Evanston. Chicago was only a few blocks south of where we lived, and other suburbs lay to the west and the north. There were just too many people around to keep seeing someone we didn’t even know. Eventually, though, I realized that it really was the same woman. These sightings continued for many years, even after I was old enough to drive by myself. It’s taken me awhile to fathom the mystery of Mrs. Ubiquitous. It’s taken knowing Crosby.

I met Crosby fifteen years ago, not long after he moved from the San Francisco Bay area to Grinnell, Iowa, a town we share with about 9,000 people. We fell into casual conversation one day across an aisle at a local restaurant, and I learned how he happened to come here. He had decided that the Bay area was no longer for him; he wanted to move to a small town to find a greater sense of community. He also wanted a college town, and he preferred it to be somewhere in the West or Midwest. “I looked at different books and identified about forty towns that seemed to have what I wanted, and I sent letters to the mayors or Chambers of Commerce asking a set of questions. I heard back from about thirty of them, but most of them just sent literature. One sent a postcard saying if I sent them \$5 they’d send me some literature. *They* went off the list. Only six of the towns sent me a personal letter. Grinnell ended up sending me three letters -- one from the head of a non-profit booster organization, one from his assistant, and one from the head of the Chamber of Commerce. Grinnell College also sent me information and said they encouraged the public to come onto the campus. That was a factor. Also, Grinnell had the businesses I needed and a low unemployment rate. It all took awhile for me to decide, but then one day I just packed two duffle bags and got on a Greyhound

bus.” I marveled at Crosby’s system of decision making, and even more at his risk taking.

Not long after my first encounter with Crosby I began to notice that, like Mrs. Ubiquitous, he was ubiquitous. Driving to the grocery store, the library, or the movies, I would often see him, invariably alone and on foot. I’d see him as I headed to one of my children’s school activities – and then usually see him there, too. A few times I stopped and offered him a lift, but he always declined. Once, in a passing conversation with him, I remarked how often I saw him walking. “Well,” he said, “I don’t own a car.” “Oh! Why not?” I asked, perhaps a bit too bluntly. He paused, and then said, “It would take awhile to explain. Maybe we could talk about it another time.” Later, I learned that Crosby walked two miles to work nearly every day, which took about half an hour. Every Sunday he walked to church, an equivalent distance.

Put off for the moment, I could only speculate why Crosby didn’t own a car. Was he afraid to drive? Did he have a condition that made driving unsafe? Had he been involved in an accident? Maybe he couldn’t afford a car.

Last April, Crosby and I finally had a chance to sit down and talk about it. I put the question to him again: “why don’t you own a car?” It turned out that none of my speculations was correct. Crosby’s answer was as rich and thoughtful as the question was simple and straightforward, although it began simply enough. He said, “I enjoy the physical activity of walking,” and contrasted this with the physical inactivity of sitting in a car. “In a car I get antsy, so there’s a negative aspect to it right off.”

“How about bicycles?” I asked.

“Bikes are OK, and I have a bike. I’ve even used it,” he said in a steady voice, “but I don’t trust bikes. They’re like cars.”

“What do you mean?”

“They can break down. I wouldn’t know how to fix either one, and I’d be stranded. I don’t want to rely on something else to get around. I don’t want a machine between me and the ground. I trust walking.”

“Another factor,” he went on, “goes back to my high school experience with the ‘car culture.’ People would ask what kind of car you had and then, based on that, they’d judge your whole character – and your importance.” The memory seemed to wring a wince out of Crosby. “And I rejected that.”

The automobile has indeed been part of the technology that undergirds American popular culture for a long time now. Like telephones, radios, televisions, computers, and now cell phones, we expect everyone to have one. But while we don’t much care what *kind* of telephone or computer anyone else has, we often take note of the make of their car. Witness the thinly veiled animosity that exists between Hummer and Prius owners, or the special admiration expected by (and usually accorded to) the possessor of a new Porsche, or the line demarcating cool and uncool cars in high schools. Why do we read so much into the kind of car a person drives?

Crosby’s rejection of his high school’s car culture has grown into a larger point for him today. “U.S. society is over dominated by and over dependent on cars, and I decided I did not want to be part of that, although I do have a driver’s license for emergencies. I guess not owning a car is like a protest.” Crosby is protesting more, though, than simply the salience of cars in American popular culture. Most of his ire is

aimed at the problems cars cause. To begin with, he points out the many minor annoyances, like fighting traffic, wasting time looking for parking places, spending money on tune-ups and other service work, keeping cars looking clean, having to renew licenses, experiencing the inconvenience of flat tires, and so on.

Then there are more serious problems. “Even at low speeds cars can have accidents. Repairs are expensive, and that requires a massive auto insurance industry. And of course a lot of people get killed and injured in car accidents.” According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 37,261 people died in vehicular accidents in 2008, including nearly 5,000 pedestrians and bicyclists. An astounding 2,346,000 more were injured. If there is any good news in these statistics, it is that a downward trend has marked the last few years. The safety problem is tragically compounded by the alcohol factor. Cars can also be targets of theft and vandalism and are often part of attempts to elude the law.

Crosby went on to mention two major problems associated with cars. “Our most recent wars have been in the Middle East, and a lot of people link those to our oil interests in the region. If we didn’t have so many cars, maybe we wouldn’t have so many wars.” He noted, but did not dwell on, air pollution from cars -- the production of “greenhouse” gases from the combustion of fossil fuels. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, the transportation sector accounted for one-third of the carbon dioxide emissions, one-quarter of the methane emissions, and two-thirds of the nitrous oxide emissions from fossil fuel consumption in the United States in 2007. Only electricity generation produces more greenhouse gases. Furthermore, transportation emissions have increased by nearly one-third in the United States since 1997 due to a combination of population growth, economic growth, urban sprawl, and low fuel prices for most of the period, although the growth leveled off in the last two years.

Crosby asked rhetorically, “what if the country cultivated a culture of walking instead of a culture of cars?” To imagine a pedestrian culture is to envision a virtually instant solution to all the aforementioned problems. It would also mean giving up some choices, convenience, connections, and spontaneity. Crosby has willingly given up a measure of all of these.

“It’s about lifestyle and outlook,” he said. “In a car, you basically want to go from point A to point B. It’s destination-focused. Anything in between is irrelevant or in the way, and stuff in the way becomes an annoyance. But if you’re walking, there’s more of an emphasis – for me, anyway – on the process.”

“But a lot of walking is destination focused,” I objected.

“Yes, but if you see something that interests you, you can stop and look at it. You can’t do that so easily in a car. You can *look*, but only quickly, in passing. To me it’s a different philosophy, a different way of looking at the world.”

“I suppose buses, airplanes, and trains are even worse.”

“Yes and no. They are also destination focused, and maybe even more so since you can’t deviate from the route. But since you aren’t the one driving, you can look around more. They are also more social, at least potentially -- not as isolating as a car. You can talk to other passengers if you want to.”

For Crosby, driving is most often a means to an end whereas walking is an end in itself, even when it is also a means to a destination. A driver may have a choice among several possible routes, but usually chooses the one that takes the least time. A

pedestrian is freer to focus on the walk itself, the passing scene – the landscape, the buildings, the people, the birds, other animals, the gardens, the sounds and sights. The senses are more fully engaged, and the act of locomotion is more of a living bridge between the walker and his or her environment. There are choices of a different kind, connections of a different kind, spontaneity of a different kind. As for convenience, its main virtue seems closely tied to the ego. The car culture is tightly bound to conscious purpose. Walking is more conditional, more circumstantial.

Crosby's insight that walking is a process and is about connecting is linked to another criticism he levels at cars: "I see them leading to a degradation of community. When the interstates were built is when the small towns in Iowa started to decline. People concentrated more in the cities, and the ones who remain in the small towns more often drive to cities, to where the 'stuff' is, and small towns lose their economic grounding. I blame that on cars.

"I wanted to live in a small town where I could walk. I'm more likely to talk to people in a smaller town because I'll know them, or at least recognize them. When I'm walking I'm more likely to say 'hi' to people. I know people in cars do that, too; they honk and wave, and if they're teenagers 'scooping the loop' they may even stop and talk. But you can do it everywhere and more easily when you're walking. This is another aspect of community: people getting to know each other because they keep running into each other." It occurred to me that I probably would not have been sitting talking to Crosby if he wasn't a walker. It also occurred to me that my mother and I never met Mrs. Ubiquitous because we weren't.

The sins of automobiles are thus numerous. They lead to environmental degradation and costly foreign policy decisions. They are costly in other ways, as well. They also take lives. Cars insinuate themselves into our personas while at the same time separating us from one another. They erode community. They lead us to focus more on arriving than on the journey, more on destination than process, more on ends than on means. So Crosby rejects automobiles in favor of auto-mobility.

"Then is your decision to walk due more to a dislike of cars than to a particularly positive feeling about walking?" I asked him. "I like the act of walking, the physical movement," he reiterated. However, I don't think of it as a form of exercise, which is what a lot of people think when they hear that I walk. For me, walking is like breathing. Maybe that's why I talked more at first about what I didn't like about cars than what I did like about walking. For me, walking is natural."

"Are there things you enjoy about walking besides the physical part?"

"Oh yes, a variety of things. When I walk to work it's often dark, so sometimes I do meditative stuff focused on breathing. Sometimes I daydream. When it's light out sometimes I read. I can concentrate better when I'm walking than, say, in a coffee shop. I tend not to get distracted as much when I walk."

"Isn't that's dangerous?"

"There *is* a danger in walking, and that's ice in winter. Of course, that can be a problem for cars, too. It can be worse when people shovel their sidewalks because it can lead to ice on the walk.."

"Are there other negatives about walking?"

“I have to be careful not to stop too long to look at a house in case people would think I’m a Peeping Tom. I’ve read in the police reports in the newspaper things like, ‘Suspicious person: man walking on the highway,’ and I think of myself. What makes that person suspicious: just because he’s on foot? That always upsets me. If you were to drive from town to town you wouldn’t be accused of vagrancy, but if you were to walk from town to town you could be, even though all you’re doing is using a different form of transportation. It’s because of our car culture, because society doesn’t think of walking or biking for transportation as legitimate. As a society we could promote walking much more than we do.”

“Do you engage in any advocacy on behalf of walking?”

“I’m aware of advocacy groups and know they are doing things. I haven’t gotten involved that way, but there’s an implicit advocacy in what I do. People know I walk, so I’m advocating with action. What I would like to see is an actual ‘pedestrian community.’ We wouldn’t do away with cars; they’d just become a lesser component of a more diversified transportation system. There would be more public transportation, and a lot more walking.”

I have known about Crosby’s walking habit for years, and for years I viewed it – like many other people in town, I suspect – as merely an eccentricity. I know now that there is much more to Crosby’s walking than meets the eye. Walking is, in fact, the outward manifestation of a set of critiques and principles that Crosby has thought about carefully and holds whether the world notes him or not. Rarely has Thoreau’s dictum seemed more fitting: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away.”

It’s clear that several different drummers propel Crosby’s walking, and it is also clear that at least one of them – the carbon drummer – is getting close enough for all of us to hear. The particular role that atmospheric carbon plays in climate change is well known. Our “carbon footprint” is a measure of how much our pattern of living depends on the combustion of wood, coal, gas, or oil, and the consequent release of carbon into the air, where it interacts with other elements to produce carbon dioxide (CO₂), one of the so-called “greenhouse gases.” Scientists are in wide agreement that society as a whole, and each of us individually, should try to reduce the amount of carbon we put into the atmosphere. So I began to wonder: how much does Crosby reduce his footprint by walking?

A variety of environmental organizations have posted “carbon calculators” on the internet to assist people in estimating how much atmospheric carbon their activities generate. Most of them are pretty superficial, but they do provide at least a rough idea. Crosby and I used one at www.carbonfootprint.com to estimate each of our carbon footprints by answering questions about our home energy use, mode of transportation, purchasing behavior (especially with regard to the kind of food one buys), and recycling activities.

Since I’ve been discussing Crosby’s walking, let me begin with transportation. Crosby does not own a car and rarely accepts rides in cars unless the person is going where he is going. The only exception he could think of was the time a neighbor drove him to Des Moines to report for jury duty. The man worked in a Des Moines suburb and

picked Crosby up on his way home at the end of the day. “I’d say my neighbor had to drive an extra ten miles on my account that day. Fortunately, I wasn’t selected. I don’t know what I would have done if I had been. That’s the only time I can think of in the last ten years that someone drove out of their way for me.” Crosby walks, rides a bicycle, and uses roller blades, but has not ridden on a train or a bus or flown in an airplane “since the last century” (i.e., since before 2000). His carbon footprint for transportation in the last ten years is effectively zero.

Other of Crosby’s activities did generate some carbon emissions, but still not a lot. According to the calculator, providing electricity and heat for his apartment put about 2.86 tons of carbon into the atmosphere last year. His consumer behavior, leisure activities, and food choices (the frequency of eating out and of eating organic and locally produced foods) for the year produced another 3.81 tons. That’s all this particular carbon calculator measured. What’s missing is the amount of stuff Crosby buys (or rather the energy that went in to making that stuff) and his share of the heat and light at work. Crosby’s total carbon footprint for 2008 was 6.67 tons.

By comparison, in the last year alone the 15,000 miles I drove in my Prius has added approximately 2.80 tons of CO₂ to the atmosphere. I have flown in an airplane three times, once to Costa Rica to visit my wife’s family, once to Orlando for a family vacation, and once to a professional conference. These three flights expanded my carbon footprint by 2.15 tons of CO₂, for a total of 4.95 tons for transportation last year. I expect my total for the last decade is pretty close to 50 tons. Since my family consists of five people, I only get blamed for one-fifth of the carbon used to heat and light our house for a year, which came to 4.29 tons. My consumer behavior, leisure activities, and food choices added another 4.47, for a total of 13.71 tons as measured by this carbon calculator. Missing is the carbon involved in producing the amount of stuff I buy (which is more than Crosby buys), the heat and light I use at work, the gas I burn mowing the lawn, and the carbon cost of our various pets, including two horses. Compared to the 20.40 tons of carbon that the average American generates annually I feel slightly virtuous. Compared to Crosby, I feel downright guilty.

The biggest difference between us, clearly, is travel. This is not merely a matter of owning versus not owning a car, but also of not living within walking distance of work (Crosby actually spends more *time* getting to work than I do: half an hour on foot for him versus fifteen minutes in a car for me), and of other trips I make during the year for shopping and recreation. Crosby, by contrast, rarely leaves Grinnell. He could, of course. He could hire someone to drive him to Des Moines or Iowa City, both about an hour away, or take the bus. “I wouldn’t mind going to Des Moines or Iowa City, but then once I’m there it’s not so easy to get around, and I don’t want to impose on anyone.” He could also fly out of Des Moines or Cedar Rapids to wherever he wanted. It isn’t a matter of money. He could, but he doesn’t. In effect, Crosby lives the opposite of voluntary exile; he is among the *domi manentes*, Latin for “people who remain at home.”

I travel less than many people -- a 2007 Gallup poll reported that the average American worker commutes 48 minutes round-trip to and from work -- but more than Crosby and more than necessary. I could give up my house at the lake, move to town, and bicycle to work. I could forego most of the shopping trips and vacations. But, in the spirit of Bartelby, I prefer not to. They provide diversion, a change of venue, variety. The yearly family visit to the in-laws and annual professional conference are less

dispensable (and actually comprise the bulk of my airplane miles). Family connections are among the most important things in life; mine, by chance, lie far away. And I should stay abreast of developments in my profession. The travel portion of my carbon footprint, then, comes down to personal preference and obligation.

What is to be done? More fuel efficient cars, for one thing, which is finally happening. For another, some companies have begun to sell “passes” to conscientious travelers to offset the CO₂ emissions caused by their travel. The company then invests the money in projects that capture excess atmospheric CO₂, such as wind farms, tropical reforestation, and biofuels. This is similar to the Emissions Trading Scheme developed by the European Union, whereby businesses are set quotas for how much carbon dioxide they can produce each year. If they produce more they can buy an allowance from a business whose carbon emissions are less than its quota. The United States is examining the possibilities of a similar cap-and-trade system. The company that provides electricity and natural gas to Grinnell allows customers to pay a surcharge for energy from “green” sources. The appeal of these approaches is that they do not require us to change our behavior.

Other approaches are more muscular. Higher taxes on air travel or gasoline, limiting the number of vehicles on city streets (say by prohibiting odd or even license plate numbers on alternate days), subsidies for public transportation, and teleconferencing all utilize sticks or carrots to alter behavior. We tend to dislike forced changes, but will voluntarism like Crosby’s and Mrs. Ubiquitous’s be enough? We have been moving along (in this case *not* walking) in a pair of comfortable shoes, but both the soles and the uppers are wearing thin. We need a new pair, and it might pinch at first.

This image comes to my mind: Crosby’s pedestrian peregrinations leave visible trails all over town, as if the soles of his shoes were coated with paint. In the course of a year, in addition to a few well-worn paths to work, his tracks meander and cross, covering much of the town. My own trails, in this image, include contrails which never dissipate and noxious plumes of car exhaust that linger in place for months, creating a choking channel between home and work and lesser amounts around town and beyond. In the “real world,” as opposed to my imagination, the wind carries away the pollutants produced by our activities, saving us from suffocation. But not for much longer.