

Call to Worship

There's colors on the **street**
Red, white, and blue
People shuffling their feet
People sleeping in their shoes
There's a warning sign on the **road** ahead
There's a lot of people saying we'd be better off dead
Don't feel like Satan, but I am to them
So I try to forget it any way I can

We got a thousand points of light
For the homeless man
We got a kinder, gentler machine gun hand
We got department stores and toilet paper
Got Styrofoam boxes for the ozone layer
Got a man of the people, says "keep hope alive"
Got fuel to burn, got roads to drive
Keep on rockin' in the free world

Sermon Text

Before I begin, I need to read you something published a few days ago, courtesy of Common Dreams' Megan Thiele Strong:

*Access to cheap fuel is not a **right**. It is a **subsidy** built on violence, [and on] both societal and environmental harm.*

And ask for a show of hands: Does anyone here have any serious disagreement with that sentiment? Especially in light of what our DoD has been tasked with, in the Persian Gulf, for the last three months?

For those who do, I'll try to speak even more clearly than I had planned and perhaps a bit more slowly!

I was last in the podium preaching about my early days of **music** fandom. I'll summarize that sermon in four words. [ahem] **God saved the Kinks.**

Fanaticism going back to my boyhood wasn't just directed at pop music, though.

I used to read the top two car monthly magazines cover to cover. Car and Driver and Motor Trend gave me the latest information about anything drivable on the American road, and I got to know just about every set of wheels' 0-60 time, horsepower output, engine displacement, vehicle weight, you name it.

My across-the-street pal's dad worked for the local Chevy dealership. And sometimes they'd have a Corvette or an SS 396 or such in their carport! And sometimes I'd get to go for a ride! And his dad didn't mind if I'd go downtown to his dealership and pop open the hoods, and doors, and sit inside!

As I got older and had actual wheels of my own, I wasn't afraid of working on cars. But I never acquired the skill sets necessary to do much of the work. Mostly I just did the work myself when I was too poor to pay someone to do it. The biggest project I ever took on involved a '63 Buick, whose V8 needed a valve job. I did the work in my parents' garage, armed only with a set of Craftsman tools and a shop manual. I learned later that my father

believed that this car was never going to roll again under its own power. But it did. For a few months, anyway!

I could easily spend the rest of this sermon talking about my subsequent rides, both two- and four-wheeled. But it's time to fast forward to 2026 and the utter regulatory nightmare Americans face today. And to understand this, we have to grasp what those regulations set out to do.

Once we had a fairly clear path, set forward in large part by laws signed by Republican presidents: 1970's Clean Air Act, which set vehicular emissions, and 1975's Energy Policy and Conservation Act, which gave us the more commonly known "CAFE" standards, which set fuel economy goals. Originally these CAFE standards were tasked with improving fuel efficiency for a variety of reasons that did not include global warming, but climate change became part of its mission later.

Got all that? You're UUs, I bet you all know this already.

I will not revisit the political upheavals that have visited this Republic since those laws were passed. You do not really need to hear the words "JINE-EEZ HOAX!" to describe human-driven climate change for as long as you live. You probably don't need to hear a TV commercial voiceover for comically oversized trucks, exhorting us to "NEVER STOP BEIN' **AMERICUHN!**" for a similar stretch of time.

Suffice to say that if you ride a bike or run on the road, or even walk on the sidewalk, you cannot help but take note of the size and apparent weight of the vehicles that share these publicly funded spaces with you.

Going back to the adoption of CAFE, average weight plummeted from an average of over 4000 pounds to less than 3000 pounds in a few years. But due to various profit-driven choices and some hilarious-if-they-weren't-tragic loopholes, and for good measure, something called a "chicken tax" that elderly VW owners might know about?

I'll give you three guesses as to what happened to that weight average in the last thirty years, and the first two don't count. It's even spawned a term that gets its own Wiki entry: Autobesity.

Adding to the carnival of vehicle design, we have the justifiable indictments by gas-engine aficionados that electric vehicles bring their own problems due to the weight of those batteries that allow for three or four hundred mile ranges.

Now, we can argue that weight alone isn't the villain. But it's hard to discount height and to a lesser extent, width. Many vehicles sold today don't permit a driver to see a small child walking in front.

What are the results of all this increased heft?

Well for starters, while passenger vehicle fatalities have continued to fall slightly per mile travelled, pedestrian and bicyclist deaths have risen at a disturbing rate. According to NHTSA, "the number of pedestrian fatalities has increased since 2009, leading to a 5-year average of 6,502 pedestrian deaths during the 5 most recent years available." And pedestrian fatalities account for a steadily rising percentage of all vehicular deaths, from under 12% in 2009, rising to 18% twelve years later.

Perhaps the best way to imagine what this means, is to consider that an American pedestrian was killed every 74 minutes in traffic crashes in 2024.

Digging deeper, one can find any number of alarming statistics and accompanying stories about depraved regulatory indifference to human suffering. I found far more than I can possibly delve into here; but to pick just one more at random, consider this from the Highway Loss Data Institute (HLDI) which, granted, is an independent nonprofit and not a government agency. But it's one that analyses real-world crash data to determine sticking points for safety on U.S. roads.

So, as of March, the IIHS announced that it will release its *first safety ratings for cargo vans, work trucks, and other commercial vehicles this spring*. Wait, what?

They... never bothered to check commercial vehicles against non-commercial...? Nope. But, glory be, we'll finally have some idea of how people who drive vehicles for a living are doing compared to those who don't. So after over a century of not having a clue about how to base our policies, I guess we kinda care?

Maybe we can accept that human toll and leave it to the whims of the marketplace.

What about that marketplace, though?

For starters, we've been told by Europe that they don't want our largest trucks. Apparently our trade agreements allowed us to export vehicles that most European nations don't allow to be built in their own country, but—through loopholes, thousands were sold every year. But that's now ending, and that 0.1% of vehicle sales is now verboten. A symbolic measure, but a significant one nevertheless.

There's also a serious affordability issue, somewhat independent of the autobesity issue. Virtually all car models have grown much more expensive in inflation adjusted dollars, to the point where the average purchase price is around fifty thousand dollars. This is due to a lot of factors, but I'll point out that when there's less upward pressure on producing smaller and more fuel efficient cars, it seems inevitable that larger, more expensive ones with much higher profit margins, will fill the market vacuum.

Oh, and what about the use of these vehicles? Say, how law enforcement is tasked with apprehending those who violate the law? In March, we had a week in which ten Americans were killed in high speed police car chases. [Shrug]

Well, we could move on to the various activities surrounding the companies that supply the fuel that powers gas engine vehicles. There was a curious case involving a Dutchman by the name of Mark van Baal. He's a fellow who switched careers, from journalist to climate change activist.

He decided to purchase shares of Exxon/Mobil stock, so that he could address issues as a voting shareholder. His most recent bit of shareholder activism concerned a nonbinding resolution asking the oil giant to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Exxon answered with a lawsuit, suing him and alleging that he was trying to put them out of business. With a nonbinding resolution. [Shrug].

Well, what if the scary likes of Mr. van Baal – no relation to the Canaanite fertility and storm deity of the same name, by the way – what if such folk have their way and convince the fossil fuel industry to tread more lightly when it comes to climate change? Well it's not just about supplying fuel to vehicles. They've also got plans afoot to – depending on who you listen to – either double or possibly triple investment in plastics production. I guess plastics are another sermon for another day, but it's just another branch of a business that is unquestionably responsible for authoring legislation at municipal, state, and federal levels, and has for a century.

There's also the issue of criminal penalties for criminal acts committed by vehicle. Vehicular homicide in much of the US results in penalties typically between three and fifteen years. In the UK, life sentences are far more common. Now, one can make a case that the last thing we should be doing here is incarcerating even more people than we already do. But still it seems curious that we are reticent about prosecuting those who kill with their cars, as opposed to those who kill by other means.

Oh and I could also bring up the issue of what seems to be endless horsepower wars, resulting in vehicles that are not just comically oversized but overpowered as well. Can't have too much power? I guess not; I guess that taking three whole seconds to get from zero to sixty is an unacceptable limitation of MUH HUMAN RATS.

Maybe it's time, here, today, to stop trying to process the problems of the world. To instead think back on a personal level. What are we doing about the time we spend on the road? Are we considering which trips are truly necessary, and which could be combined with others at a later time?

Are we thinking about sharing rides when we can, or is that just more trouble than it's worth on, say, a Sunday morning when it's enough of an effort just to get up and dressed and here by 10 o'clock without making additional stops en route?

How about our work? Did we once have work-at-home arrangements that came with the COVID-19 distancing, that went away when our bosses told us that they wanted us **in the office** and no more sloughing off and making time for your dog-walks and your home-cooked lunches, you slacker! Did we tell our bosses what they could do with their latest email or did we say "yes sir, and how high should I jump next time?"

There's the issue of public transit availability that just never gets much past the point of "it would be nice to have a rail connection... well, anywhere, really!" for an awful lot of folks, not just here in Metro Atlanta but all across the United States. Anyone who's had the pleasure of trying to have logical, unemotional conversations about funding mass transit can probably relate a few horror stories. My favorite was an individual—granted, this WAS online so it's hard to know if this person was for real—who claimed that he would move if he discovered that a bus stop had been located within a mile of his home. If he's no longer drawing breath, I feel it's certain there are plenty more where he came from.

And there's the whole uncomfortable question "so what do YOU drive? what kind of carbon footprint are you leaving when you hit the road?" I hope by now you all understand that there's a reason my sermon title is "WE are what WE drive," and not YOU are, or I am. It really is a collective decision. But it does lead to an inexorable conclusion.

That conclusion is pretty simple. When it comes to national policy, think of what the crunchy, granola-eatin' hippies used to say, and what bears repeating today: **Think globally, act locally**. Understand what legislative efforts are taking place at the federal and state level and work to help candidates and elected officials support wise policies.

When it comes to speaking with individuals, I suggest that you simply tell them: "**Drive what you like, as long as it's legal.**" That's it.

It might prompt a response like “well what do you think OUGHT TO BE LEGAL?” and you’ll have a whole three day conference’s worth of issues to discuss. Or it’ll draw a nod and “well, you have yourself a blessed day!” as you both go on your merry way.

Thing is? These **are** very tough issues. Very real lives depend on the choices we make today. There really are people’s lives in the balance, not just those who perish on our roads because they’ve been outgunned on account of thoughtless personal choices made, and because of foolish incentives to make larger vehicles; but also, those who’ll die from respiratory diseases due to air pollution, and from climate related problems that range from home destroying melting ice floes due to flooding in Nebraska, to heat exhaustion on the street in Mumbai.

Meanwhile? I’ll admit, I’ll continue to cast a covetous eye on those small displacement motorbikes being offered for what amount to a not-crazy credit card balance. I’ll try to remind myself that they’re both dangerous AND that they manage to pollute like nobody’s business.

And I’ll wish you all the wisdom to make good choices, both in your vehicle purchases, and engagement with both the rich, powerful guys, and the poor folks who may have to drive to a low-wage job 40 miles each way in a 25-year-old subcompact.

Nobody said this trip would be easy.

Let’s face facts. We’re all looking at nine miles of bad road ahead.

Benediction

I told that girl I could start right away
Then she said, "Listen, babe, I got something to say
I got no car and it's breaking my heart
But I found a driver and that's a start
Baby, you can drive my car
Yes, I'm gonna be a star
Baby, you can drive my car
And maybe I'll love you"
Beep-beep 'm-beep-beep, yeah!

Go in peace, and enjoy the week.