

Going Car-Free Carmen Mills, Car Free Vancouver

My name is Carmen Mills. I am a Vancouver-centered Director of Free Will. I am really stoked about the fact that people are finally starting to figure out that we can actually reclaim our freedom by letting go of our cars.

A friend of mine, Charles Montgomery, is writing a book about “hedonics” – the economics of happiness. He’s been researching in cities all over the world to find out what makes people truly happy. One of the most consistent indicators he has discovered is that the shorter the average car-commute, the happier the people are. The more time people spend in cars, the more unhappy they are. Cars, for all their convenience and ease, are a constant and cumulative source of human misery. We sell our souls to buy cars, and the cars destroy our souls.

The irony of the thing, of course, is that we have we have totally bought the notion that cars=freedom=happiness. In fact, to be car-dependent is to be just the opposite of free: it is to be a slave. We live and die as slaves: to jobs we hate, to the military-industrial complex, to marketers and puppeteers, to the matrix. Somehow no matter how hard we work, life just never manages to be like a car commercial. What’s happening here? We were promised freedom (with air bags and aircon, no money down and guaranteed financing) – but somehow we ended up as slaves.

It’s boring and oppressive. And sometimes it feels like car culture/the fossil fuel industry is such a massive behemoth that we will never bring it down. But the fabric of denial is wearing very thin in spots these days, and glimmers of sanity are starting to break through. Car sales in Canada are down 16% over the last year – and although you can chalk that up to the “economy” or whatever, lots of people are also just waking up and gearing down. Speaking of which, kudos to the global artificial economy for collapsing – self-preservation kicks in, just in the nick of time.

Anyway, I know we are well into The Great Turning, because I’ve been working on this stuff for a long time and nowadays I am consistently flabbergasted by how quickly things are turning around. I know for example that when we started the first Car-Free Commercial Drive Festival in 2005, we encountered massive suspicion and defensiveness and downright animosity. The “decision makers” were skittish as all get-out. To question car-culture in 2005 was to question an unassailable core value. No one wanted to risk the ire of the car-dealers. And if we wanted to communicate beyond the fringes to the mainstream, we had to walk on eggshells in order not to offend.

But things are changing so quickly! People are really starting to get it at every level, and now we are definitely moving along with the turning tide of public and political will. The sarcastic media comments have just about melted away. Car-free celebrations, street-reclaiming, and regular street-openings (vs. “traffic-closures”) are happening everywhere. Bike sales are going through the roof. Cities all over the world are tearing down freeways and getting their act together.

It’s not that I don’t think we still have a long way to go, or a bunch of fights still need to be fought, or that things won’t get worse before they get better (in fact, things are getting better and worse simultaneously, I’d say we’re neck and neck). But I can see that on the path toward car-freedom, in the world that I can touch and see, things are turning around. This is very

fortunate, because car-freedom means people are free, not slaves – and free-thinking people make better decisions.

So what does it mean, then, to go car-free?

To go car-free means to get free.

It means to feel your freedom in your body – in your legs, in your lungs, in your heart. To go car-free is to remember that no matter what General Motors may have told you, you are self-propelled and you have power. And your free movement need not depend on someone else's misery.

To go car-free is also to reconnect to the land – to experience your environment directly. You are free to really see and smell and hear the world – without a metal shield and an air-conditioner between the world and you. You and the world get to merge. You get to taste the un-conditioned air. You get to feel the gravity of the earth sucking at your feet. You get to take off the blinders and see.

To go car-free means to reclaim your commons – the space that belongs, collectively, to us – that has been stolen away bit by bit and paved in the name of mobility. Our public squares, our back alleys, our markets. Our STREETS. So much concrete taken from people and given over to cars! And why? To isolate us, to discourage public assembly, to suppress revolution. Stick us each in solitary confinement, in a metal capsule. Force us to live in sidewalkless cul-de-sacs, and to spend a quarter of every day in the soul-crushing commute to the downtown parkade. Separate us from our neighbours. Put us in little cells and watch us get all lonely and scared and timid and angry, and, um, alienated. Well guess what? We are social creatures. We want to talk to each other. We have a right to communicate. We want our zocalos back, and our mercados and our our Tiananmens and our STREETS back. Streets are for people, and we the people demand freedom of assembly. Car-freedom. Freedom to communicate.

To go car-free means to throw a big fat monkeywrench into the matrix of self-deceit. To go car-free means to escape from the machine. To go car-free means to recognize our free will and reclaim our common destiny.

People are always asking me if I think we will ever see car-free areas, or car-free cities, or car-free streets. Oh seriously folks – car culture is collapsing all around us. Car-freedom is inevitable. Lets not debate the issue, let's just start right now to love our bodies and give ourselves the self-propelled pleasure we crave. Let's get on with the job of creating the urban paradise we deserve. Let's cut to the chase and start conjuring up the victory party.

We are going car-free. Free at last, free at last, free at last.