

Safety and righteous fun for bicyclists

Contributed by James G. Doherty
27 August 2006

[Editor's note: For those concerned about peak oil or the environmental devastation of the car, bicycling is a serious option for getting around. Of the many burning issues regarding bicycling, which Culture Change will cover in the coming months, safety is one of the biggest concerns that we deal with as long as we must share the road with cars.

Some of us are unable to ride a bike, just as some are unable to walk for whatever reason. Ironically, many of those unable to ride bikes are either disabled by car crashes or have been living the sedentary life of sitting behind the steering wheel to go to and from jobs that pay for their car habit.

Biking remains sensible for vast numbers of present drivers, albeit not for long-distance commuters. Such petroleum-dependent members of the work force would do well to move near their jobs or find new work near their homes. Waiting until the fuel runs out for cars, buses and trains is foolhardy, when peak oil is upon us. Until change is forced upon consumers, motorists can obviously hop in their ice-cap melting machines to go a bikable distance just for some minor consumer item.

Bicycle safety is improving, in places such as San Francisco with its proliferating bike lanes and helpful bike stations. Yet there is still so much risk to one's body - despite the rewards of cycling - that everyone who bikes would do well to read Jim Doherty's politically astute article below. Part of Jim's message is to have fun getting where you're going while using truly renewable human power that does not spew global-warming pollution! - JL]

Riding the wrong way on any street is the second leading cause of bicycle accidents. Not being seen is the leading cause.

So, when riding a bike, always wear bright clothing with reflective material. Helmets with reflective material help tremendously with safety too, which includes avoiding citations: whether you are required to wear a helmet or not, generally the police will be watching you with an eye to citing you for anything else, no matter how trivial, if you are not wearing at least a hat or helmet. Helmets can also prevent bike jackings, provide a sun visor, and keep eyeglasses dry.

Even fastened-on hats and hooded jackets provide much more protection than nothing, and help you relax and concentrate on your riding, thereby avoiding accidents. A hooded jacket presents no risk of flying off you just before impact, as hats and stocking caps can do. But it's still true that a fastened-on helmet is best.

Helmets can also easily be fitted with automatic safety lights which trigger on by motion, and off by lack of motion. Taping tiny flashing LED automatic lights atop the helmet gives riders another good reason for wearing helmets: fantastic nighttime visibility. And, at such "highest point of the bicyclist," reflective tape or light will, particularly at night, reduce radically the chances of hearing the most often repeated phrase around bicycle accidents: "I never even saw the bicyclist."

Often this phrase originates from lips of another bicyclist: Almost half of all reported bicycle accidents are bicyclists colliding with each other! I estimate that at least half of all bicycle accidents go unreported, too, since for the most part, bicycle accidents do not produce life-threatening injuries. Basic laws of physics apply: accidents at typical bicycle speeds of 25 miles per hour or less are seldom devastating, considering the bike might weigh 30 pounds, whereas car accidents involving speeds of 25 to 200 mph of vehicles weighing thousands of pounds usually are life threatening or devastating.

Dmitry Orlov, who wrote "The New Age of Sail" in culturechange.org earlier this month, responded to this article's draft:

"One of the biggest risks for a bicyclist is of getting "doored" by drivers opening their doors in front of them without looking. This happens to me several times a day, and I know people who got seriously hurt, and one who died, when this happened. The solution is to never, under any circumstances, ride within the swing range of the doors of parked cars. If this means that motorists cannot pass you, that is fine, because your safety is far more important than someone else's convenience. On narrow streets clogged with parked cars, it is a good idea to decide ahead of time whether it is safe to let motorists to pass you or not, and, if not, to prevent them from passing you by holding down the entire lane. Sometimes this upsets the drivers, and they honk and shout obscenities, but more often than not they calm right down the moment they get past you, and don't seem to remember you moments later, so it is generally safe to ignore them."

Culture Change publisher Jan Lundberg chimed in, "One self-preservation tactic is to occasionally ride on the sidewalk a short distances if no one is on it."

To enhance your visibility at night, try getting those tiny lightweight valve stem lights, currently available from www.tireflys.com and www.sparkxline.com. [Note: all my product plugs are mentioned for information, not formal paid endorsement, and the author makes no guarantee of any performance.]

I love the new, lightweight but rugged black plastic pedals which have a little dynamo generator built in and fire bright LED light to the side, rear, and front with each push of the pedal, and without ever needing polluting, expensive, and difficult-to-install stacks of watch-type batteries. Also, with these automatic pedals, no effort is needed on the part of the biker: Forgetting to turn the easily stolen battery light on and forgetting to turn it off, (meaning dead battery), are probably the two main reasons battery operated lights fail miserably at protecting bicyclists. Try sourcing the pedals by begging for the "Pedal Flashing Safety Lights" from Google, Amazon, or www.funsourcecellc.com. They retail for \$20 a pair and come with a pedal wrench. One pedal per bike is better than none per bike, as just one can dependably throw hard-to-miss bright, moving light towards traffic both front and back of the bicyclist.

Another safety tip: Hang your helmet on the handlebar when you're not riding - that way you have to put it somewhere like on your head to get going. Remember, too, helmets protect riders from the police "protection" that often translates into police treating bicyclists like they are Rodney King, just because they are bicyclists. Police have this peculiar tendency to think Stretch Hummer Citizens are vastly superior to what they consider to be nuisance criminal bicyclists, so without a helmet you get a concussion from a police baton used for your own "protection." Support efforts in your town to give local police departments "sensitivity training" in the idea that the not-so-lowly bicyclists are entitled to the same rights that not-so-lofty gross polluting stretch Hummers are, even if that Hummer is outfitted with large breasted gals in a Hummer-optional rolling hot tub.

If you don't do cell phones, consider carrying an old "recycled" but not yet de-activated cell phone. It costs nothing for service since you need only enough service to call 911 when some DUI red-light runner who's tried to turn you into roadkill, also flees the scene with you bleeding in the street. With luck your "on hold" time for 911 will not exceed the life of your old cell phone battery, which you will need to charge maybe about once every 90 days or even 6 months just to keep it topped up.

Always ride away from car/congested streets unless you like a congested chest and brain cancer, which is often the net result of breathing diesel fumes. Especially if you are a twenty-something, the "cluster" of brain cancers being diagnosed in that age group can probably be traced back to deadly petroleum diesel fumes combining with deadly styrene emissions from those huge, artificial rubber tires. Yes, you may have to make a fun extra block or two ride to find adjacent lightly trafficked parallel streets, but there you will find a quiet ride instead of ducking drivers engaged in road rage and hit and run games on the busy streets.

Said busy street may well contain your destination, but be particularly wary in towns that have announced they want to "encourage" bicycling. Usually, the net result in such cities is an explosion of ridiculous, unenforceable or very randomly enforced absurd rules which utterly discourage bicycling. Inept bureaucrats who always drive, although they may have a racing bike gathering dust in storage somewhere, will generally just observe whatever it is that bicyclists need to do in a town to get by, then enact prohibitions against that and call this "encouraging" bicycling.

Bicyclists must realize, preferably before attempting to ride amongst cars, that most Americans, especially Californians, have decided that the very purpose of existence is to create as much smoke and noise as possible, in the shortest amount of time practicable, for the most trivial reasons imaginable. Thanks to decades of saturation advertising, market manipulation, and really what amounts to psychological warfare by oil and auto conglomerates, people now seldom even think in terms of the possibility of transportation other than by "private" car. Bicyclists try to survive in a context of cars where every driver should be presumed to be operating on the thesis that since bicyclists might interfere slightly with this "autogeddon" of noise, fumes, and gasoline consumption, that bicyclists are sort of an invasive species.

To "ride defensively" the bicyclist must presume that every driver on the road makes it their autoholic mission to turn as many bicyclists into roadkill as possible. The result is similar to the egregious story of the invasive cane toads of Australia. The Aussie drivers operate on a philosophy of going out of their way to hit as many cane toads as possible to try and contain the damage this hideous little foolishly imported species does to that continent. (Google "Cane Toads of Australia" if you think I'm kidding.) A cyclist who surmises this is the philosophy of most drivers towards bicycles, has a "leg up" on their own safety, a much superior position than having both legs up like a dead bug. It's important to presume that drivers are, for the most part, already driven stark raving mad by the avalanche of new car & SUV advertising, plugging Busby Berkeley style dancing Cadillacs in between the stories of oil wars, gas shortages, cat 5 storms, evacuations, and global warming.

Since the Bush era particularly, the US of A now exists solely to maximize profits for the oil, auto and (Halliburton?) pavement industries; any invasive little creature, like a bicyclist, that interferes with this mission is perceived as a threat and should, to the driver's way of thinking, be obliterated. Remember drivers are now actually watching those SUV and EXXON ads at the wheel thanks to mini-tv screens installed in the dash by "aftermarket" car stereo stores.

The naked aggressive pleasure that drivers get from stomping on the accelerator pedal in order to stomp then on the

brake pedal at the red signal a few feet ahead, is easy for bicyclists to observe in millions of places on any day. The lusty thrill car drivers display with their grins as a cloud of toxic rubber smoke billows from each screaming wheel as they spin a car in donut circles, is evidence of the ugly truths of these statements.

Thus, one must proceed with great caution, care and humility on a bike until road-raged drivers - busy watching DVD's or hacking at the wheel - figure out what bikers already know: The Only Way to Win is to Not Play the Game.

My personal strategy is basically to ride in such a way as to never cause a driver to honk at me, nor screech rubber in any way around me. The only birds I hope to see are those coughing in the trees above any busy street. Being extremely deferential and remembering every driver is in, and has a right to be in, an enormous rush to the next red light, is a recipe to make it home with a smile. Remember: Eye contact is crucial, but no guarantee of a driver registering the fact you are present, especially if you see reflections in the driver's eyes showing they are attempting to drive and notice you while watching those vital He-Haw reruns from a laptop on the dash or seat next to them.

Many drivers operate turn signals in such a way as to be mere tease signals; they mean a driver only might be making a turn, not that they WILL be making a turn. Remember car makers for years have churned out tons of vehicles where the turn signals malfunction, the horn sounds off accidentally, the brake lights get confused with turns and emergency blinkers, etc. Car makers have essentially prevented Congress from enacting similarity standards for all sorts of safety equipment so each car works differently and they very, very often malfunction or confuse the driver on several scores. Detroit has tried to make basic things like wipers and signals and mirrors and indicators that work, into luxury items, as though making it home alive without a wreck is something you have to pay extra for! Even in 2006, cars are basically designed to crash into each other and bicyclists, unless you pay tons extra for the luxurious "safety package" which most buyers skip.

People often ask me what kind of bikes I like. I simply say, the type of bike that, when you press down one foot on a pedal, the bike's saddle tends to shoot out from under your butt, so hang on to the handlebars and don't thud to the luggage rack. Many if not most bikes made subsequent to about 1990 will perform like that. I particularly like the astonishing effortless magic carpet bikes, with computer engineered frames and ultra-light components, that are actually designed to fly as downhill mountain racing bikes. With just a tad of adrenaline and effort, you can easily beat and "keep up with" traffic on city streets, almost all of which post speed limits of 35 mph or below.

My favorite bikes to date are made-in-the-USA Cannondale Jekylls, I have one model 3000SL and one 4000SL, SL standing for super light. They are so good they are both discontinued models! Even with a full fuel tank, (aka water bottle), light, luggage rack and panniers, I can lift the entire bike off the ground – with a single finger. This level of performance can also mean the difference between life and death in terms of acceleration to escape the demolition derbies US urban streets have become, as car-driving politicians and car-driving architects and car-driving urban planners marginalize and trivialize bicyclists.

Generally, officials will regard these highest and best zero pollution vehicles as ugly, and something to be tucked out of sight where thieves can work on their locks and parts with no one noticing. Lack of secure, visible bike parking is the single greatest barrier to popularizing bicycling. Since transportation is now all about style, ego, and one-upmanship rather than substance, bicyclists doing practical things like getting from point A to point B quietly, independently, and healthfully, should and will get their bikes stolen due to this "bikes are trivial and ugly" philosophy.

All this is made possible by rituals of car parking stalls costing public monies often in excess of \$100,000 per single car parking spot, while bicyclists are required and relegated to park their ugly bikes in a dark-cornered den of thieves. The Baptist Divinity School on Dwight Way in Berkeley, California offers only a single bike rack for its 7-building campus, and directly over the rack is a sign indicating anyone trespassing in the dark cul-de-sac where the bike rack is dumped, will be at risk of arrest for trespassing. The campus was designed to extravagantly accommodate cars, but the rusting, crumbling bike rack was an afterthought of someone thinking of the best way to get rid of bicyclists and their bikes altogether.

Apparently, the real agenda of America today is to be as auto- and gasoline-oriented as possible. It is a love-to-the-death, fatal attraction characterized by Clint Eastwood's famous line about prying the gun "from my cold, dead hands" - but of course it is the steering wheel which has to be pried from cold, dead hands on every road in every state in America - a daily ritual of paramedics everywhere.

To sum up, my two key strategies to stay alive bicycling is to figure out the phrase "be seen and be cited," pardon me, that's "be seen and safe." Visibility for the bicyclist is everything, and it's important to note nearly half of all reported bicycle accidents are bicyclists colliding with – other bicyclists. Even bikers tend to assume no other vehicle is approaching when they don't hear the ugly purr of a gas engine. There has of late also been a big, big uptick in bicycling nationwide, thanks in part to Lance Armstrong's heroism, health, and fame, but also generally because modern high tech bikes make a mockery of old beater bikes, and because bicycling IS healthy, clean, safe, quiet and affordable.

Sadly, in affluent, "autoholic" America, bicycling must be "encouraged" by being regulated to death. Every year a

bumper crop of ludicrous new laws are enacted, many of them having results opposite their intent, and few of them announced to the public and fewer still actually enforced. The purpose of legislative work now seems largely to create an ever-increasing reservoir of impractical, unenforceable, unannounced, and unfunded body of law which makes it possible to designate everyone a criminal violator subject to arrest and detention at any time. Again, the pseudo-liberal city of Berkeley California provides a good example: bicylists face fines stiffer than cars for many trivial violations, for example: Parking a car blocking the sidewalk is only a \$75 citation.

In 2005, Berkeley experienced the death of beloved wheelchair disability activist Fred Lupke, when he was forced by a car parked blocking the sidewalk, to enter the street in his wheelchair; whereby he was promptly struck and killed by a car. But so much as standing next to and clutching a bike in the wrong way on a sidewalk in Berkeley can garner a criminal misdemeanor conviction and a \$211 fine, if an officer deems you were "operating" the bike on your way to the bike rack – which is installed on the sidewalk. In fact, under the Berkeley Municipal Code, it is not possible to commit an infraction by any sort of bicycle-related offense; the entire code section makes every conceivable misdeed by bicycle a CRIMINAL matter. Generally, the loftier the rhetoric about "encouraging bicycling," the harsher the crackdown on those who actually try to do it.

Two of the best reasons for wearing helmets is protection from bicycle-jacking hoodlums and police batons.

One final note: Join and support your local, state, and national bike advocacy organizations, which offer free trainings and certificates in bicycle safety. Rules for safe and legal bicycling vary tremendously by local jurisdictions. The League of American Bicyclists is Lance Armstrong's favorite.

Ride to live, and Live to Ride! Critical Mass rides can be hella fun, too, if you play your pedals right and consense good lead and tail riders to keep the group together. Strength in numbers: we are not blocking traffic, we ARE traffic!

- Jim Doherty, a.k.a. "Dances with Bicycles, sleeps with chameleons, and swims with dolphins." Jim is a transportation bicycling specialist, and lives in Oakland, California. This was written in March 2006.

* * * * *

Further reading:

Jim's Bike Blogger columns in Culture Change:

www.culturechange.org/bkeblog.htm

Jim's website is

www.danceswithbicycles.org

"The joy of riding a bike: sticking it to corporate polluters," by Jan Lundberg (Culture Change Letter #28):

www.culturechange.org/e-letter-28.html

Library Bikes (Arcata):

culturechange.org/library-bikes.html

Pedal Power Produce:

culturechange.org/pedalpowerproduce.html

Bike News/Issues/Culture:

culturechange.org/bicycling.htm