

## From This Corner:

### Public Enemy No. 1 to Community and Mental Health: The Automobile

Community, we all know, is vital to mental health. But what makes a community? What drives it asunder? As I see it, nothing is more devastating to community vitality than the automobile way of life. It is past time to charge: the automobile is Public Enemy No. 1.

The automobile is driving people mad; yet it is rarely, if ever, discussed at meetings or in publications of mental health professionals. There is much propaganda about basing mental health centers and corrections programs in the "community," but it never seems to be asked, "Where is the community?" The fact of the matter is that there is no community – it disappeared with the coming of the automobile.

To mollify increasing public disenchantment, and to make the automobile worker feel that he is doing useful work, advertisements convey the message that the automobile is consonant with an attractive, invigorating environment and that ownership is a requisite of the full, rich life. In fact, though, the automobile brings ugliness, pollution, economic waste, agony, injury and death. Integrity in advertising would call for portraying the automobile not in a sylvan setting, as is now done, but rather in a traffic jam or collision.

Unlike our forefathers, who stepped out of their doors into a rich communal setting, we encounter arteries of traffic. The streets are now monopolized by the automobile, which has displaced children, pedestrians, bicyclists, streetcars – in brief, everything but other automobiles, parked or in motion. In 1908 in the *Yale Law Journal*, H. B. Brown, retired United States Supreme Court Justice, urged the courts not to disregard the rights of others in favor of the motorist. His plea went unheeded.

The number of automobiles has been increasing five times as rapidly as the human population and is the principal cause of environmental degradation. The automobile not only causes noise and air pollution, but also makes enormous territorial demands. An automobile requires 1400 square feet of space for turning and parking, equivalent to the living space of a family unit. The shopping or apartment facility is dwarfed by the space allocated for parking. College campuses have been turned into huge parking lots. Concrete-covered terrain and "service stations" – not for humans but for cars – at nearly every corner are rapidly replacing all rustic scenery.

The rotting downtown, the sterile suburbia, the tacky-tacky shopping center, the desolate motel are all vulgar monuments to the auto culture. Our national flower, observed Lewis Mumford, is the concrete cloverleaf. In *The Highway and the City*, Mumford writes: "In using the car to flee from the metropolis the motorist finds that he has merely transferred congestion to the highway and thereby doubled it. When he reaches his destination, in a distant suburb, he finds that the countryside he sought has disappeared; beyond him, thanks to the motorway, lies only another suburb, just as dull as his own . . . . In short, the American has sacrificed his life as a whole to the motorcar."

As the car gains dominance, the outside becomes less a place for living than for driving through, and community activities fade away. Urban space becomes degraded. The once-charming *Zocalo*, the public square in Mexico City, where people used to gather and stroll, is now a maelstrom of traffic, noise and pollution. A once-beautiful Los Angeles basin has been turned into a disaster area. Saudi Arabia, with money gushing in for its oil, has been turned into a dump for cars. Cape Town is no longer a gem of a city. Indeed,

one is hard put to find a place that has retained its charm in the face of the mechanical invader.

The disintegration of our cities began with the advent of the cheap, mass-produced car (combined with cheap fuel) and became catastrophic after World War II when the majority of people could buy one. Not included in the sticker price, though, was the cost to society at large.

"Every man a king," promised Louisiana Governor Huey Long, "a car in every garage," but the car (or two) now presiding in every garage has reduced its owner to a chauffeur rather than elevating him to an imperial level. Mother today doesn't cook much of a meal, but it's not her fault — she's driving a car pool, chauffeuring the kids around, or tied up in traffic coming home from work. And one who finally gets through the traffic to get to his psychoanalyst is so exasperated by the hassle that he spends his 50-minute hour unwinding.

Every man a lover, the automobile industry promises. At one time the car did provide access to a hideaway, but the plethora of vehicles and the vast network of highways to implement them have now destroyed virtually every romantic setting. A multitude of ads continues to depict the car as synonymous with sexuality, but showing one off today, including Mach I, produces only a yawn. A car produces only an illusion of power and sexual magnetism. "Putting a tiger in your tank" does not do much good if there's a jackass at the wheel, and that's what the automobile really makes out of people.

Man-turned-into-jackass spends hours each day at the wheel; and hours parking it; reading or listening to advertisements about it; insuring it; fueling, cleaning, or repairing it; recovering from injuries or backache from driving it; and attending funerals of friends or family who have died in collisions (60,000 a year in the United States). We seem to worry more about the car than about baby. Our every thought seems to revolve around the car. Illustrative is the recent experience of a kidnapping victim. Upon her release she went into a drugstore to telephone home. Seeing her in tears, the druggist asked, "What's the matter, lady, you got car trouble?"

With no viable alternatives, buying and insuring and driving a car is as voluntary an act as peristalsis. Though forced to drive, the motorist — not the automobile industry — is held responsible in the case of collision. A kind invitation, "Have one for the road," is fraught with hazard — as we can get about only by car, drinking is perilous, day or night. The seat-belt and air-bag, though possibly reducing injury, complete the ludicrous picture of man imprisoned in a capsule. Children, the elderly, the poor, and others who do not drive due to poor vision or other handicap are all immobilized prisoners of another kind. Generally, public transportation is unavailable and taxi fare is too expensive for regular use. (Taxis eliminate as customers those who cannot afford to pay \$3 to \$5 for a ten-minute ride.) The old song, "I don't get around much any more," is appropriate today for many.

The constitutional rights of freedom of movement and association are being curtailed by the very technological development which was heralded as implementing these rights. The automobile creates a style of life that extends distances — it disperses shops and dwellings — which in turn require an automobile to get about. As these machines multiply, however, they immobilize even themselves. Traffic on the average moves more slowly today than in 1905. The overall result is that transit in the U.S. ranks next to that in Pakistan.

Not only community life but family life is frustrated by the automobile. An old maxim — what separates me from my fellow man also separates me from my family — expresses that sentiment. The outside has been lost as a place where man can spontaneously meet, talk, sit or walk around with others. He is cooped up either at home or in a capsule. He takes out his agony and frustration on his spouse or children. The relationship of the automobile way of life to divorce, child-abuse, and homicide should not be underestimated. It may be no coincidence that Detroit, the motor city, is also the

murder capital of the world.

The automobile way of life makes Solzhenitsyn react as fervently as he does to labor camps. In a lengthy letter to Soviet leaders in the fall of 1973, he warned against the horrors of the automobile and urged the Kremlin not to encourage the emulation of that style of life. He wrote: "And all of you are old enough to remember the old cities, before the advent of the automobile — cities intended for people, horses and dogs . . . In spring the sweet scent of gardens wafted over the fences into the streets." He pleaded, "Do away with the automobile."

People in the U.S. arriving at work no longer say "Good morning." "What's good about it?" I'm asked by a student just coming off the so-called freeway. The "freeway" ("expressway") is verily a euphemism for a Gulag Archipelago. To be sure, recent emigrés from the U.S.S.R. say, the torture and frustration on the "freeway" make the Soviet Gulag Archipelago seem like a rest home in comparison.

Automobiles are now, like the British of 1776, lined up like the redcoats, bumping one another over. Is liberation in sight? Congress has designated the 1970's the Bicentennial years — why not make this decade the target date for liberation?

RALPH SLOVENKO  
Professor of Law & Psychiatry  
Wayne State University Law School