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# THE HERBST NEWSLETTER

astrological-cultural-spiritual-political views & opinions

--- Thoughts, dates, and reminders about our lives as members of the craziest species on this lovely planet. Like a message in a bottle washing up on the sandy shores of consciousness ---

Issue #110; April 2009

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Dear friends,

This month's commentary is another of my occasional non-astrological newsletters. It is a combination memoir, troubled homage, and guilty confessional regarding my personal relationship (and our collective relationship) to the internal combustion engine vehicles of conveyance that have been so influential in shaping our history and are now like the proverbial albatrosses around our necks.

--Bill Herbst

## Commentary: **AUTOMOBILES**

Among my earliest memories of childhood is a scene that I defined in the past as a "polaroid" or snapshot, but which is more accurately described as a short video from a cell phone, in that the imagery records a span of only about five seconds at fuzzy-low-resolution (as are so many long-ago scenes from real life that exist now only as neural-memory embeds). I remember zero about what came immediately before or just after that five seconds. Nothing particularly extraordinary stands out about the scene itself, and I can only conjecture about why this specific moment impressed itself on my memory banks, to be recalled decades later.

The scene is outdoors. I am walking down the right edge of a newly-poured concrete street, as there is no sidewalk, and the ground is muddy. I'm walking next to my father, who is holding my left hand. My left arm is raised high above my head. We are visiting the suburb under construction where my parents' new

California-ranch-style house is being built, checking on the progress of our home-to-be. I do not see any workman nor hear sounds of saws and hammers — apparently this is a Sunday, and quiet. The year is 1951, and it must be spring or summer, since I wear only a light jacket. My father is 35. I am about a year and a half old.

The scene itself is not panoramic. I see wooden-frame houses under construction, but only on the periphery, and not in clear focus. I am conspicuously aware of only five elements: myself, my father (for whom I felt profound affection in this tiny shard of memory), the new concrete street upon which we walked, the muddy ground next to it, and — prominently occupying the center of the scene about fifty feet away — my father's car, a three-year-old 1948 model Ford sedan. I can see the rear end of the automobile with crystalline clarity, and I even recall feelings of fondness for this modern, industrial chariot that would take us back to the apartment.

I've been able to date and time the scene because of later-known facts. My family moved out from a rented apartment in the city of St. Louis, Missouri, ten miles west into my parents' first owned home in the brand new second-tier suburb of Crestwood, Missouri, in the fall of 1951, just a month or two before I turned two years old. About two years after we moved into our new home, my father traded in his old, used Ford for a brand-new Ford, the first of many.

My father was, you see, a "Ford man." This was apparently common practice for American men at the mid-20th century, to link their personal identities to a certain manufacturer's brand of automobile. Our next-door neighbor was a Chevy man, and across the street was an Oldsmobile man. Of course, when my father was born in 1915, such intimate linkages to automobiles didn't exist yet. My father's childhood contained dirt roads with horses and buggies as well as electrified streetcars in the city.

By my birth in the fall of 1949, automobiles were ubiquitous in America. They were well on their way to achieving total domination. The infamous "conspiracy" between General Motors, Firestone, and Standard Oil killed most of the electrified public transit streetcar systems in our major cities. Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System — the most massive building project undertaken by human beings up til that time — demoted trains to a sorry second place as people carriers and goods transporters. Automobiles supplanted the horse in American mythology (notice that we measure the capacity of internal combustion engines in terms of "horsepower.")

The myths of America contain two fundamental and contradictory longings: the first desire is for *individual freedom* — literally, the freedom to do whatever the

hell one wants to do — while the second wish is for *social justice* — so that everyone is provided equal protection under the law.

Automobiles are linked to the human drive for personal freedom, in that they provide mobility at a moment's notice and open the landscape for us to go both near and far. We can hop in the car to go to the grocery store, but we can also hop in the car to go from one ocean to the other. Bicycles and motorcycles are ready at our whim, but limited in their inability to take us long distances in comfort and ease. (The motorcycle has taken over the niche in American myths for "rugged" or "outlaw" individualism, whereas the bicycle has cornered the myth market on "self-reliance.")

Despite the fact that gasoline- and diesel-powered engines were woefully inefficient, the fossil fuels from which we refined gas and diesel were plentiful and cheap. As early as the 1960s, however, some geologists and oil industry analysts knew differently. Unfortunately, their warnings about a soon-coming peak in the availability and production of cheap oil — as with the warnings of most people who espoused concern over "finite" or "non-renewable" resources — went unheeded. We had a chance during the OPEC oil embargo of the mid-1970s to gear up for more fuel-efficient vehicles and energy conservation measures, but the oil crisis passed, and we immediately went back to sleep. Even today, Peak Oil still has naysayers, but their numbers are shrinking almost as fast as those who deny the reality of human-caused climate change.

Nonetheless, however, the fantasy of the automobile continues unabated in media advertising. Even as the docks are crammed with acre after acre of unsold new vehicles, ad agencies continue to crank out the perverse dream of driving. Ads show luxury vehicles cruising at high speed around the twisting curves of roads far from the madding crowd and surrounded by ethereal beauty. These roads invariably contain no other cars and no speed limits. Judging solely from advertising, "no limits" continues to be the propaganda mantra of automakers and corporate culture in general. Perhaps that's because the only people who can afford these luxu-sportsters are overpaid robber-baron CEOs, who believe in infinite loot anyway. "Have it all, have it now, and the future be damned."

I am distinctly of two minds about automobiles, sliced right down the middle between my perceptions and my imprints.

While the days of the internal combustion engine are clearly numbered, I don't foresee the disappearance of personal vehicles. Cleaner, more efficient, and renewable power sources are already being developed. Electric cars and hydrogen engines are already a reality, though not in mass production numbers, and other as-yet-undiscovered technologies may emerge that will be adapted to automobiles.

That said, the automobile as we have known it — with cars for every person in a household — is clearly a species of dinosaur, just waiting for a meteor large enough to render it extinct. Such a hit may already have occurred in the recent financial meltdown whose eventual result will be global economic depression in the decade ahead. So the TV ads might be oddly correct after all. Their “have it all, have it now” orientation may be curiously apt, and urgently so, since the whole shaky economic edifice of the automotive industry could collapse tomorrow.

The rational part of me says, “Good riddance.” The automobile’s century-long history of pollution, environmental destruction, resource misallocation, and even social alienation needs to end if we are to survive and renew ourselves, not to mention preserving our ecosystem. When President Obama speaks of renovating our road and bridge infrastructure, I get quite upset: “Screw the interstate highways! Rebuild the railroads!!!” But the other side of me will have none of it.

The other side — the part of me that has imprinted on 59 years of real experiences — LOVES automobiles and cannot imagine life without them.

My entire life has been shaped by automobiles. Since I got my driver’s license at 17, I can define different chapters of my life by what cars I drove and owned.

In what may seem an odd comparison but isn’t so odd really, I’ve had a much better track record in owning automobiles than I had in intimate relationships with the opposite sex — fewer breakdowns, more pleasure, less cost (in both dollars and emotional sanity). Yes, among the eleven cars I owned, I did suffer through two lemons, but don’t even ask me about the suffering I went through in love affairs. Not that I would do things differently if I had it to do over, but looking back, cars were easier on my heart and my psyche than relationships were. Which is part of what many of us like about our cars: They may break down, but they don’t complain, and they don’t hate us just for being whoever we are. (OK, so the whole paragraph is half-joking, but only half. And I’ll bet lots of people, both men and women, can empathize with the cosmic joke...)

Now that I’ve had a stroke and live in a very small town, my car is more important to me than ever. My ability to live independently depends on it. Yes, there’s a bus service in Florence, but I literally can’t walk to the bus stop. And driving is one of the few times now when I may forget that I’m broken and crippled, since cars function as an extension of the body. We are all cyber-robots in our cars. Have you ever been in a serious car wreck? I have. In 1977, I was a passenger in a head-on collision on the highway, one of my numerous near-death experiences. Five of us in a van and two people in a pickup all survived the accident, although both vehicles were totaled. Metaphysically, that’s an

opportunity to go through a real death experience, but the surrogate body (the car) dies rather than our own body.

I've never been a particularly good animal (I'm more like a 1950s sci-fi "brain in a jar," but with passionate feelings to contrast with intellect). Though I love nature, I tend to want to experience it *at a distance*, which is to say, through the windshield of my car, which happens to have roughly the same proportions as a Technicolor movie screen, since that's the other of my oh-so-backwards 20th-century imprints: movies. In fact, one thing I miss terribly from my youth is outdoor drive-in movie theatres.

Behind this rambling monologue is a point that I feel needs to be made much more strongly and more often as we approach the actual onset of the 2010s:

**None of us is completely ready for the changes that are coming.** That seems on the surface to be a sweeping generalization, but I believe it to be true or nearly true. To some extent, we are all creatures of habit and imprint, tied to the past of our own experience.

Change is not resisted or denied *only* by the well-off or the powers-that-be, but in one way or another by most of us. Even among those who long fervently for substantive change, there is resistance. Even among those who are well-informed and well-prepared for a new, smarter civilization (or a kinder and gentler one), there is denial. Even among those who are fed up with waiting, there is anxiety.

We know enough now about human psychology to understand that we all share to some extent the Stockholm Syndrome, the tendency to come to love and cherish even the worst in the world around us, to accept and embrace even the insanity, cruelty, and murderousness of that world.

The resolution of the Tao in ideal balance and total harmony is a very special visitation. We all get moments of it, little flashes of transcendence and Ah-Ha's, but damned few are able dance with that lofty consciousness as a steady state. Most of us remain to some extent caught within the webs of our contradictions and paradoxes, entangled in our own melodramas.

We may or may not like what life has in store for us in the decade ahead. Probably we will find some necessary changes easy to adjust to, to the point of relief or even obvious pleasure. No doubt other changes will be difficult, some even impossible to accept.

No one, however, is expected to perfectly accept the grave uncertainties of the times in which we live. Anxiety in the face of daunting circumstances and

potential dangers is *not* evidence that something is wrong with us. On the contrary, it may reveal one facet of our maturity, namely, the common sense wish to choose safety over risk.

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*I have an article to write for The Mountain Astrologer (assuming that they approve it, which they usually do), so I may or may not write a newsletter for May. Depends of how slow I am in composing the article. If you don't get one in May, please know that I've taken a month off, and that the newsletters will resume in June.*

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