SOME YEARS AGO a newspaper in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, which has a population roughly equal to Maine's, ran an eye-popping headline:

165 People Killed! 7,562 Injured! Over $100,000,000 in Property Damage! Provincial Government Helpless! Expects Same Carnage Next Year!

Were Saskatchewan residents victims of some natural disaster or terrorist attack no one heard about? No, the headline refers to the annual damage from what the paper calls the province's "meat-grinder transportation system." Calculating the value of a human life as just lost lifetime income, the paper estimated the cost to the province at three quarters of a billion dollars. This didn't even include the medical costs of respiratory illnesses occasioned by the automobile, the full costs of policing roads, and the myriad costs of keeping oil flowing freely.

Concerning this last factor, President George W. Bush suggested the unthinkable to U.S. drivers after Hurricane Katrina—that they conserve gas and that Federal employees carpool or use public transit. Nonetheless, administration policy initiatives have fallen short of the rhetoric and the failure to alter transportation policy has deeper roots than this administration.

Oddly enough, the nation's deep psychic dependence on oil became clear to me during a public health campaign. Civic leaders were properly interested in extending our children's longevity. One enormous health threat, however, remains under the radar as each day adults and teens get into automobiles and drive to work, or school, or any number of places. And every day roughly 115 U.S. citizens die in automobile accidents. Seven times that number are injured, many seriously. Yet years ago when my wife asked a public health professional why far more attention is devoted to teenage smoking than to the auto, she was told that "we choose to smoke, but everyone has to drive."

Do we? And do we have to drive as much as we do? Even President Bush hinted at a more provocative perspective when he commented that we are "addicted to oil." Looked at as a dangerous social addiction, the good news is that overindulgence in driving can be treated by methods far less painful and intrusive than those employed against many of our other public health crises.

Let's go back to World War II. Society was less auto-dependent, but a majority of adult workers still owned
cars and routinely used them for business and pleasure. Gas rationing dramatically changed commuting and recreational patterns. Unlike with Prohibition, relatively few attempts were made to undermine the system or defeat it at the polls.

In the forties, policy and lifestyle changes were successful. They were, however, impelled not merely by fear of a common enemy but also by nationalistic and civic commitments. These commitments carry risks. The willingness to accept rationing was eased by the commonly shared conviction that the United States was the greatest nation in the world and that sacrifice would spur the return to even greater glory of the U.S. consumer production machine. An older neighbor of ours reminded me that once rationing was lifted, his neighbors immediately went on long car rides. So the question is how can we put more humane and environmentally sound alternatives on a psychologically sustainable foundation, one that will make us more law abiding, less bellicose, and more willing and able to adapt to the unpredictable fortunes of nature and culture?

Thus far the periodic spikes in gas prices have caused proportionately small reductions in driving. Consumer demand for driving is very inelastic in economic jargon. And on the policy realm, most discussions turn to alternative fuels, which are surely desirable, but barely scratch the surface of alleviating the economic and environmental effects of a car-dependent culture. So I would like to start with one basic assertion: cars and public transit aren’t simply interchangeable commodities, they also express different understandings of human freedom and the good life. The private automobile still represents our individual autonomy, the ability to travel where and when we wish, and a sense of our place in the world as symbolized by its relative luxury.

The devotion to certain commodities is in some ways undergirded by religious or philosophical convictions. To be human is to possess some not always fully articulated or fully provable sense of the way things are or should be. We need this sense to lend some degree of order and coherence to our lives and keep our minds from being overloaded. I am going to term these perspectives on the nature of reality “common-sense ontologies.” While many people of religious faiths—Jains, Buddhists, Christians—are ecologically friendly, many fundamentalist Christians, who seem to have the ear of the president on this matter, operate from the perspective that an omnipotent God created the world ex nihilo and gave humans both freedom and dominion over the earth. In this view, the world created by God is like a well-oiled machine that allows human beings, over time, to achieve increased control of nature and greater wealth.

In some versions, wealth and technological wizardry are one proof that we have a healthy relationship with God. Either in response to an intrinsic anxiety about our finitude or because our ontologies exacerbate fears of death and tend toward exclusivity and dogmatism, we often vilify those whose actual or apparent lifestyles seem to question prevailing social norms, especially the quest to control nature in order to become wealthy. To borrow from the president, we hate them for what they are, not for what they do.

Much of the environmental community has failed in the larger positive task of valorizing leisure and free time and alternatives to mass consumption.

Americans are spending increasing numbers of hours in traffic jams. Nonetheless, the vision of the automobile is captured in an endless series of advertising copy shot in remote and often arcadian locations and coded with subtexts of power over nature and social success. More recently, car ads have resorted to a stunning array of visual techniques. Backdrops and camera angles change rapidly, suggesting the automobile both transcends and escapes current constraints, and the rapidity of the change and the infinitely receding backdrop associate the car with power and mystery. In addition, such ads can have a hold on most of us even before we are old enough to own our own cars (I grew up outside of Detroit, and for me the highlight of many springs was a visit to the Detroit Auto Show.)

The Bush administration has skillfully drawn on and intensified this imagery. Johns Hopkins University political theorist William Connolly points out that:

Early in the 2004 presidential campaign, Bush’s team sped around a NASCAR track in front of 100,000 fans. He emerged from the only SUV in the entourage to an incredible roar of approval. The crowd responded to the SUV as a symbol of disdain for womanly ecologists, safety advocates, and internationalists. Bush played upon the symbol and drew energy from the crowd’s acclamation of it. Resentment against those who express an ethos of care for the world was never named, a message expressed without being articulated.

When an unspoken message reverberates back and forth between leaders and followers, it can have more power. It becomes uncertain who leads and who follows. And like one of those secret fraternity handshakes, the unspoken gesture between the parties adds to their sense of exclusiveness.

Public transit, on the other hand, has long been coded as a necessity for life’s losers. Students regard the bus to school
as not merely inconvenient but as a sign that they aren't fully respected members of the adult community. When older citizens reach a point when driving becomes problematic, they often resent and resist losing the right to drive. There are obvious practical reasons for this, but there are psychic ones as well. The car is part of their psychic economy as respected beings in control of their world.

The very public form of any community transit entails different social relations—a need to interact with others across an ethnic and economic spectrum. (Even in a traffic jam, one has a degree of privacy in a car not experienced on a bus.) Public transit seems objectionable because it is provided to everyone regardless of economic success, and it even extends support to those some deem morally deficient. Baseball fans may remember Atlanta Braves pitcher John Rocker's rant about the ethnic, racial, and lifestyle minorities encountered on New York City subways.

For some citizens, the cost-benefit analysis will cure an overindulgence in driving, but when attitudes toward domination of nature, the ways in which we view others who are different from us, and even our gut feelings and aesthetic sensibilities enter in, a multistep approach to cure our addiction may be required.

We need an understanding of the human mind and its relation to nature that both acknowledges the power of modern science and technology but doesn’t delude us into thinking that we can fully comprehend and control our social and natural world or that technological mastery is all there is to life. Ideally, that understanding should allow us to find some joy in a nature that may sometimes exceed our grasp and to find delight in pursuits and peoples who don’t always share our ideals.

Along these lines, progressives must take seriously the way popular culture responds to and partially engenders gut-level fears and hopes and redress these concerns. Progressive environmentalists should learn some lessons from Bush at the Daytona 500 and from Madison Avenue. We need a pop-culture aesthetic that valorizes public transit and, more broadly, alternatives to the energy-intensive, work-and-spend culture that is so prevalent. Public transit needs to be connected symbolically to images of leisure, release from daily challenges, and new and expanded visual possibilities that the picture windows on trains and the freedom from intense driving concentration can frame and enable. In addition, we need imaginative portrayals of positive cultural encounters in such settings. I am reminded of an ad for the ACES high-speed train that shows a group of riders—mostly middle-class but culturally diverse—working on laptops, but also dining, conversing, and, looking out at a changing background of mountains, streams, and so forth. What the ad properly highlights is the way this form of transit can encourage leisurely conversation among diverse people, contemplation, and an appreciation of or even intense focus on particular surroundings seldom possible in a car. Why not extend these ideas to all forms of mass transit?

Today most ads for transit alternatives stress its utilitarian aspects. Much of the environmental community, in highlighting the environmental damage cars occasion and the cost savings of public transit, has failed in this larger positive task of valorizing leisure and free time and alternatives to mass consumption. This failure may reflect or be intensified by some of the ways progressives themselves have been insensitive to newly emerging anxieties that don’t fit their preferred models.

In the film Fahrenheit 9-11, Michael Moore portrays the president’s decision to vacation in response to professional crises as a sign of moral deficiency. Bush’s most endearing trait, however, may be that he isn’t a workaholic. It is a strange sort of left politics that implicitly celebrates long working hours rather than validate the contribution leisure makes to human development. Moore’s sarcasm suggests inadvertently the ways even liberal culture has been captured by mainstream norms and may reflect some submerged anger regarding the toll that work life has taken.

Leisure is both a subject of conscious or latent desire as well as a condition for the emergence of more inclusive states of consciousness. When workers have more free time, they can experience more sides of their own diverse personalities and at least potentially revisit assumptions they hold about other cultures and ways of life. Workers with more free time may be more inclined to contemplate these issues of alternative transit and social justice, and can mobilize an effort to make them a national priority. Protests centered on leisure time, whether from students vis-a-vis homework, French and German workers striking to preserve the thirty-five-hour workweek, or women demanding relief from the second shift, seem to converge in interesting ways.

And yet, à la Max Weber, modern capitalism needs an ethic of hard work and self-denial to foster growth and to justify the hierarchies and inequalities of
the workplace. Once a basic level of material comfort has been achieved, further consumption and work must often be induced by images of leisure or even indulgence, such as a 7,000-pound, $70,000 luxury SUV with twelve cupholders and a rear-seat DVD entertainment system.

This leads me to ask if we are at a broader tipping point in our politics. A war, waged in part over oil, drags on as costs and casualties increase on all sides. The world is full of talk of peak oil and mounting short-term pollution costs. The population is aging. The inefficiencies of the transit system are more apparent to many. It seems the time is propitious to demand that the price of gasoline reflect its true costs in warfare, pollution, police services, and human lives. We should use tax policy to advance this end before utterly disruptive circumstances force the same end, with destructive social and economic consequences.

**Two new rights might emerge as focal points of our politics: the right to free time and the right to live without a car.**

Of course a gas tax that reflected real costs would push its price in excess of $10 a gallon and make today’s prices seem as cheap as they really are. Such a tax would be extremely regressive, hurting poor and working class citizens the most. In recognition of this injustice, it should be coupled with drastic reductions in our most regressive taxes, like social security and state sales taxes. A more egalitarian tax structure is not only just in itself but needed to ease the insecurities that nourish the most fundamentalist incarnations of NASCAR mania. Just as importantly, revenues from such taxes must be committed to positive purposes. Let’s get back to the World War II analogy. My hometown became the arsenal of democracy. Today, a sagging auto industry could be put on a new wartime footing by using major research and development funding to design whole new generations of comfortable midrange vans for rural and suburban park-and-ride alternatives. This program would reduce local and regional unemployment, attack growing economic inequality, and make industry more efficient and competitive. More capital and operating subsidies for state and local transit alternatives are equally essential.

An aspect of transit economics that deserves mention is the reasoning that the more individuals use public transit, the cheaper and more efficient it becomes for them. If more commuters use it, transit systems can afford to have more runs and the service becomes much more convenient for all users, perhaps attracting even more riders. But how do you attract the initial riders when most individuals in this country say they won’t use public transit options because they aren’t convenient? This is a nasty Catch-22, and a good justification for subsidy of transit options to set a more positive dynamic into motion. In any case, given that we subsidize the private automobile, we ought to do at least as much for public transit options.

And again, sensible changes are more likely if we can also highlight the ways such changes could enhance our lives. For example, gas costs of $10 per gallon could dramatically alter teen and adult habits. Carpooling, not merely to work but to grocery stores and other retail establishments, would become commonplace. Business and working schedules would adjust to accommodate carpools. Working at home with expanded use of Internet and other communication technologies, the full potential of which has scarcely been tapped, could be dramatically expanded for the service sector. If adults came to rely on comfortable and attractive buses, even school buses might be seen as something more than second-class transit. Extracurricular schedules would be adapted to public transit options. These changes would leverage vastly more adult and family time for parents of younger children.

Two new rights might emerge as focal points of our politics: the right to free time and the right to live without a car. I am not so naive as to think that any of this is immediately possible. Anyone with my perspective also suspects that no prospect is ever certain. But if we don’t dream, we make nightmares more likely. The effort to claim such rights is more likely to succeed if it is as inclusive as possible in both political and philosophical groundings. Fundamentalist greens who see in nature itself a set of steady harmonies and values, as well as Christian groups inspired by a social gospel tradition who are eager to give a leg up to the poor, could be vital players. Even within the evangelical community itself splits are appearing, including dissidents concerned about the greenhouse effect who are committed to stewardship of the earth as a priority.

Properly addressed, the current juncture in our politics and culture could yield more time at home, more attractive and sustainable travel options, more opportunity to interact with a community that grows in its interests and diversity by the day, and more time to experience the beauties of a rugged and changing nature that so many pay so much to experience.

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