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Bike Economics 101

Some time ago I read a witty article on bicycling.com titled “My Family Gave up Driving for 30 days to Stick it to the Man – an experiment in car-free living”. The writer describes how his family of four stopped driving their car for a month in favour of cycling, supplemented by carpooling and public transit. He even bought his family ‘One Less Car’ hoodies to wear for the experiment! He humorously quantified the tangibles by calculating that if “everything stayed the same and the kids never left home, we'd save \$31,000 while sparing the planet 40,000 pounds in CO2 emissions in our lifetimes”. The intangibles were harder to quantify but perhaps more thought provoking: “The lifestyle made me happier and more hopeful. I liked the collective act of reinvention; and found the simple act of riding together electrifying in small ways. On various rides—home from soccer practices, or after sleepovers—I heard about my daughter’s first high school dance, and listened as my son absently hummed a song learned in French class.”

The article got me thinking about environmentalism as it relates to happiness. Over two centuries ago, Adam Smith’s book ‘The Wealth of Nations’ launched modern economics, and since that time society has been doggedly pursuing the perceived ideal of maximum economic production. In fact, Smith’s ideas still dominate our economy, our politics, our society, and even our personalities. However, as we are becoming increasingly aware, maximum economic production is pushing up against ever more limited resources.

So how does this impact our everyday lives? Well, many have come to realize that having more does not equate to being happy. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is based on the belief that maximum economic production leads to increased well-being (with well-being tied to wealth), but for years research has been showing that’s not always the case. After a certain level of income, increasing wealth does not lead to increased happiness. GDP does not take into account environmental degradation caused by economic production, nor does it account for psychological well-being, i.e. happiness. The conclusion that economic growth is not necessarily providing a corresponding boost to human morale is certainly provocative - exploding a bombshell underneath society's ongoing quest for material gain.

Well, I contend that there is still at least one thing out there that supports the economy, lowers your carbon footprint and makes you happy. The bike. The Bicycling article puts it so well: “Is the bike becoming something indispensable, a utilitarian piece of everyday middle-class weaponry to combat fuel-price inflation? Screw you, Exxon Mobil: I'm riding today.” Likely just saying this out loud will make you happy!

In October 2008, Trek Bikes CEO John Burke wrote his stockholders, "Higher gas prices have created a cycling-commuter boom". He also wrote, "During the 1987 Stock Market crash and the recession of the early 90s, the bike business was relatively immune to market turmoil; and in this type of economy, there are winners and losers. SUV's are losers; small cars are winners. We think bicycles are comparable to small cars."

Yes, gas prices have gone down again, but no one believes that lower prices will prevail over the long term. And even putting economics aside, riding a bike simply makes you feel good. Whether you are commuting by bike to work or cycling for exercise, you will undoubtedly experience moments of pure and utter bliss. I read somewhere that melancholy is incompatible with bicycling - true words. As I rode along the St. John River through Maugerville last Sunday morning, I realized how much more you see from the bike than you do at 80km per hour. Fog lifting slowly from the river, farmers picking cucumbers, and stunning August flowers never noticed from the fast lane.

And in a grander context, imagine for a moment - as you ride rather than drive the few blocks to the store - the transformational possibilities in that choice you made. What if millions of people began to see their way clear to doing the same?

Famous British author H.G. Wells once wrote, "When I see an adult on a bicycle, I do not despair for the future of the human race". As a futurist himself, H.G. sure knew what he was talking about.

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