

09-19-08 Share the Road & Prevent Accidents

When I read 19th Century novels, it seems that walking was a natural and wonderful part of ordinary life. People thought nothing of walking several miles to pay a visit and then, of course, walk back again. Perhaps the walkers were a type of middle class. They were not so well off that they could order up the carriage at any given moment but it also indicated that they were not required to stay at the farm or homestead at all times for yet another form of labor.

Just imagine that, though! In the nineteenth century people expected to walk great distances. They expected it and benefited in numerous ways, including time for conversation and the appreciation of nature, along with the obvious benefits from the exercise. In their day, though, they did not have to share the road with speeding cars; only the occasional cart, buggy, wagon or walker. How and with what do we share road in this century? Hummers, Mini's, motorcycles, bicyclists and pedestrians are all sharing the road, while listening to their ipods and talking on their cell phones, mind you. Don't you just cringe when you see this, really see it and think about the consequences?

But what can we do? When my children were old enough to ride their bikes down the street to their first jobs picking weeds at cranberry bogs or tending to Monsignor McNeil's farm to milk his cows, I only wished they lived in the 19th Century, when my only concerns about soft shoulders would have been related to women's dresses and not the edge of the road. Changes are on the way, though. Towns are paying attention and there is a movement steadily growing that views our roads as a community in and of itself.

Big things and small things are happening. Sidewalks were recently added to Plympton's little center, and I was thrilled. It meant that children and families and elders, with one street-crossing could then safely walk to the sweet shop, the library, the town hall and to ball games and in the other direction, to the post office, the sandwich shop and our only the convenience store. This was progress in a very important direction. It also materialized one wish of many when, several years ago, I participated in a "visioning" exercise at the Plympton Library. We were asked to call out anything we wished for the Town. While some called out "a public swimming pool!" and someone else said, "buses!", sidewalks were high on the list. Sometimes wishes do come true, even from such unlikely sources as the State Highway Department.

Even when we have sidewalks, the act of walking to a convenience store or library in contemporary USA is not all bliss. Did you know that, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, that a pedestrian is killed in traffic every 110 minutes, and one is injured every 9 minutes? The reasons for those tragedies lie with the vehicle operators, the actions of the pedestrians and the environment.

Some reports indicate that pedestrian deaths are on the decline. Yet, those same reports conclude that one major factor for the decreasing statistics is that people are walking less. That is sad but it is no wonder. Have you observed and thought about the design of town centers, of neighborhoods and, especially of shopping areas? Even when shopping at a mall, have you ever gone into one store and then gone outside to drive your car to another part of the mall so that you could enter again? I suppose we have all done that but guilt won't heal or help anything, so skip the guilt. We can only resolve to get involved and do differently.

One approach to reducing accidents and deaths due to automobile and pedestrian and/or biker clashes is to address the physical environment. This has actually become an important goal for engineers specializing in transportation. The Institute of Transportation Engineers is “dedicated to meeting society’s safety needs through engineering, education and enforcement”, says their website. Designing our environment so that it includes safe lighting, curbs, sidewalks, speed bumps and even such innovative approaches such as benches for resting along the way and raised intersections, allowing people of all sizes to be in the view of the drivers, all help to encourage walking and decrease the chances of accidents.

In addition to environmental modifications, there is another approach also. There is the approach that says lives can be saved with a different mindset of everyone using the road. That mindset is called “Share The Road”. For instance, when drivers stop thinking of the road as their territory but, instead, are always on the lookout for pedestrians, bikes, carriages and horses and when walkers stop assuming they are seen and that the law is on their side, but, instead, make eye contact with drivers, the road is shared and lives are saved.

Honestly, even though common sense told me that this lesson was needed, I never heard of the phrase or knew that this was a whole movement, growing and going strong with special license plates, bumper stickers and road signage until I saw the phrase “Share The Road” spelled out in flowers and shrubs on a road island upon entering Cape Elizabeth, ME. Even then, I did not realize the significance until someone from the UK read the column and emailed me, asking for a photo of that picturesque message. I had simply thought, “Nice message. Nice presentation. Wonder how they trim those plants?”

The need for change is here. That is certain. Most of the work is already done. We can copy! I mean... we can emulate and learn from others! Think about it: We can save lives, get exercise, save fuel, commune with nature and learn how to be respectful of others. These are basic kindergarten lessons worth relearning and applying as adults.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. She hopes to hear your stories of sharing the road. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us