

THE POWER THAT STEERS

by Steven M. Swersky.

Don't for one minute believe, please, that if you fit into a category known as Parents of Schoolgoing Children, that you run your own life. Huh! you might say, of course I know that money is my master and thus work is the compelling trammel of my existence: I march to the beat of the Dime. But slow down. We're not discussing here the LIFE BLOOD of your life, we're talking about the gas and oil and air of everyday existence. An unseen force dominates a great deal of what you do, and how you do it.

Sex? NO. Love? NO. Eating? NO, NO! What then?

Carpools!!!

If you are a wife, why do you get up in the morning? Carpools. And a husband? Because your wife is hassling you to schlepp the pool today. Want to drive to L.A. to experience the new Trade Fair? Can't do it - same reason. Movies, theatre, ballet, football, baseball anything that starts and finishes at a particular time cannot be attended because those rascally kids need to be picked up from school and delivered to their grubby houses. Have you noticed that at all these wonderful events there is a huge hole in the population age of the spectators - there are never any people between the ages of 20 and 45 there!

Just think about all those extra hours of hard labor you put in; the sacrifices you made (having your hair cut by an anonymous face at the first-come-first-serve place); the humiliating coupons you hoard to save elusive pennies for that exquisite new sports car, for example. Halt! You can't buy that! You have to buy a van furnished with at least twelve seats to carry all those kids in the carpool.

Don't dream of a sneak-away vacation if it's during the school calendar. Try asking someone with whom you share the burden to TRADE a day with you. The replies you get, ranging from simple hanging up to demented laughter to unspeakable outrage and vile language, are instant proof that you only have acquaintances and no friends at all. I remember trying to get a carpool co-prisoner to take over my afternoon drive because my wife was in Scotland and I was in hospital, downed by a cataract operation on my right eye. He refused point blank to consider helping me out until I faxed him a certificate signed by both my surgeons stating explicitly that it was unsafe for me to drive twelve minutes after a general anaesthetic.

So let's take a look at this insidious power that controls our lives. Let's look at the ungrateful kids who get driven from their doorsteps directly to the steps of their classrooms. The resentful pawns and bishops who are always so chipped off because I have not dressed them and eaten their breakfast for them; not done their homework; nor dealt with the bully who is picking on them.

Let's look at the ratings kids levy on the adults that chaffeur them hither and thither. Some distrust you because you are silent, some are agravated because the radio (usually an oldies station) is either too loud or too soft, some think you are wierd and foolish because you try to relate to them by chatting and making jokes. No matter why they dislike you and detest riding with you, they will be angry as Hell if you are more than four seconds late at their collection or drop off point. Does it matter that there was a fifteen car pile up on the highway, or that the earthquake just ripped open your suburb? No way. And if you should be so spiteful as to make it rain at the time they have to be picked up.....

They will wreak revenge on you, believe me. By leaving sticky sweets and candy in your ashtrays. By blowing their noses on your seat cover, by forgetting their sweaters, shoes, socks, and even dirty underwear on your car's floor. By fighting incessantly with each other, and by swearing ludely under their breaths.

A whole industry known as auto detailing has been spawned by the great American institution: the school carpool.

How the heck did kids get an education in the time of the cowboys?

When was the first carpool started? Must have been in Ancient Times, perhaps when little Nick pretended he did not know his famous father Aristotle who tried to kiss him goodbye and wish him a nice day. Same way your kids don't know you when they are in a group together with their peers!

As an adult, I always drive away from school with a tear in my eye. I'm sentimental you see. I see my little boys rushing blissfully to their friends and classmates, oblivious of anything hard and unfair in the world. Look at each child: every one a masterpiece of beauty in the creation. They truly are, each one of them magnificent. So why the Hell do they have to grow up into these walking zombies known as adults?

And in my mind's eye I see the little boy that was me hurrying onward, ever hungry for new things, and hungry to be older, bigger, more respected by the smaller fish that swam the sea of life behind me. And in my naivete' never realising that this was the best time of life, not knowing that things would never get better than those early years of school.

Carpools are underground news networks. Everything that you are not supposed to hear about, every secret behind-closed-doors occurrence that goes on in your neighborhood is discussed in vibrant detail in the back of your vehicle. About Tom's Dad punching his Mom in the neck, and Lisa's folks' new bathroom remodel, and the future inheritance potential of Jarred's sick grandmother, and the police knocking on Alec's door, and the new girlfriend of Hanks' stepfather. The general coming and going, immigrating and emigrating, loving and hating of the world deliberately concealed from public view. How callously these kids play back the tape-recordings of the things that happened last night which they illicitly managed to see and hear by pretending they were asleep. Your neck-hair bristles with trepidation because you wonder if your own children have been magnifying YOUR dirty washing.

Working out the carpool schedule is also an interesting topic. Different groups have differing systems of determining who drives when, but one thing is for sure : there will be fights over Mondays, Fridays, and especially public holidays. Arguments will arise because some families have more than one child and therefore should drive more often. You can buy computer programs that generate the most favorable odd- and even-number calender dates which include the most off-duty days. You feed in the number of drivers, the number of children, the distances of the various houses from your own home and the school, and on and on.... I have even heard of somebody who hired an attorney to be present when the roster was drawn up.

Naturally, the more expensive your vehicle, the more sought after as a carpool member you will become. Certain families will only let their kids be driven in luxury cars valued over a certain price, and not more than one year old. Kids have been known to refuse to go to school if the fancy car is being serviced and they are picked up in the second family car. So exclusive have some carpools become that tee shirts that read "I'm in the ABC carpool, eat your heart out!" are commonplace. I swear I've even seen certain children wearing thousand-dollar leather jackets bearing the same legend.

Never leave out a mention that your kid is in the same carpool as George Bush's nephew.

Every time you drive to school there will be one youngster who forgot to shower the last five days, or whose tummy is running and cannot hold onto his farts, or who has chickenpox ready to infect the whole car load, or whose finger gets caught in the door.

I am willing to bet that there isn't a single carpool driver who hasn't gotten a speeding fine trying to achieve peace and quiet by rushing to get the vehicle emptied of its passengers. More than half the people I met in traffic school responded with the same answer when asked why they were there.

America's favorite son, Henry David Thoreau declared that most people live lives of quiet desperation. Huh! If he had lived to the technological, spoilt-brat nineties he would never have declared that the desperation of the carpool was QUIET!!!!