

When We All Work Together, Great Change Happens

On Sunday, Sept. 3, 1967, I had recently moved into a graduate student apartment and was about to embark on an academic journey, which would lead to my first master's degree.

My personal life was happily consumed with the delightful challenge of adjusting to the second year of marriage to the lovely Janice Ann Riley who, to this day, remains my spouse, companion and best friend.

I could hardly have imagined the impact of an event an ocean away from me since my self-absorbed world was, well, self-absorbed.

While Sept. 3, 1967, may have little significance for you, it was a revolutionary day for the country of Sweden.

I have no data regarding church attendance in that Scandinavian country on that particular Lord's Day, but something akin to a modern-day miracle happened early on that morning.

While I was still sleeping, half a world away, they actually stopped the traffic on all the roads and streets in Sweden.

From 1 a.m. until 10 a.m., circulation of non-essential Swedish traffic was prohibited while an army of road workers advanced on the empty motorways and changed every last one of the road signs.

Like a nationwide square dance caller, the entire country heard and responded obediently to a clear command: "Everybody stop!" But, instead of the instruction to "change partners!" the Swedes heard the injunction to "change lanes!"

The country had decided to stop driving on the left side of the road and to begin driving on the right.

While the automotive implications of this event fascinate me, I am thinking more about its symbolic implications for our current time.

How utterly unthinkable would it be, in this modern day, to imagine an entire nation of people - with varied ages and types of vehicles, diesel or gasoline engines, gun racks or rainbow peace signs in the rear windows, differing socioeconomic classes, unlike political views, contrasting outlooks or spiritual experiences and a multitude of vested interests at stake - to act in such aggregate harmony.

Can you imagine trying to pull off such a current, simultaneous transformation?

If a similar enterprise were attempted today, some would see an insidious attempt by "big government" to interfere with the "God given" rights of the citizenry to choose for itself.

The paranoids would likely view it as some sort of conspiracy orchestrated by sinister known or unknown forces.

Others would certainly protest that the "Founding Fathers" had ordained the "correct" side of the road on which we should drive our carriages.

The ultra-libertarians would insist that mankind was meant to be free of such attacks on the "right to the pursuit of happiness."

Surely, some would interpret the Bible's book of Genesis or one of Paul's epistles to prescribe proper driving habits or the book of Revelation to predict just such an apocalyptic, end-of-the-world scenario.

The Swedes pulled it off, but it was not easy.

As late as 1955, 80 percent of the Swedish population voted no on a referendum to change the driving lanes.

By 1963, when the Parliament approved the change and the Right-Hand Driving

Commission was created, the logistical work of preparing for change began in earnest.

Official vehicles had to be adapted, major intersections changed and many other alterations were needed in advance.

A total of 3,500 buses were altered, and the tram system in the center of Stockholm was removed entirely.

The big changeover for Sweden had a positive result. On the first day after the change, there were actually fewer road accidents than on the day before, presumably due to enhanced visibility.

Let's dream together about those more-important-than-vehicular-commuting changes in our world that we know need to be made together and that just might enhance our corporate visibility.

Can we gain from the Swedes traffic transformation and apply the learning to our own essential, personal or corporate renovation? I hope so.

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