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inch per moment

on righteousness.

“Good design should change behavior without people even noticing.”¹

The battleground of cars, jostling merrily in their aluminum hats, has slowed to a standstill long enough for me to check the rest of my escape route. My phone alerts me it will take one hour and fifty one minutes from this point to my destination, a total of 18.9 miles, if I choose to go by bicycle. It’s worth considering. I have walked as much in a day, relishing lakes and hills and cold air; this would feel a bit different, smogged views limited to the (now late) Kosciuszko Bridge and a skyline whose beauty has become as ordinary as it is lovely, but – arguably, doable. Anything to escape the maddening, twisting ugliness in me as another car slips into the sliver of space between signage for the next exit and the car ten meters ahead.

I am 18.9 miles away from a birthday dinner for a friend: a barbequed, roasted, savory feast of a buffet, not quite as delicious when congealed by an hour of lateness. I weigh the value of chasing down the next intruder to the line against the fantasy of a fresh drumstick. Ten cars have tried to wrestle into any opening ahead of mine, but I close every possible inch. Another tries, then speeds away. Better have failed, and I have a reputation to maintain.

I write storylines to pass the time, and to preserve what little sanity I have while facing horrendous traffic.

The car behind me shelters a young man who has just been informed by his estranged family that his father – the only one who still cares about him – will be taken off life support this afternoon, in an hour in fact. Every second passes by; another car from the lane to our left creeps ahead of both of us without a care as to who is left behind. The young man tries to calm the collective, human ugliness in him as he watches another vehicle seize the space he unwittingly created as he texted his aunt, pleading for a bit more time until he arrives.

I weave no stories for the car that cut in; I only think, selfish asshole.

I will not share the more colorful language that accompanies this thought, as this is an essay about righteousness. I do not make space for these individuals in my mind (refuse to, in fact) because their stories, and the reasoning for their actions – real or imagined – are not what convict me to stay in my place in line, however aggressively I may go about it. Degrees of urgency and claims to minimal harm do not construct my decision to either run ahead and take my chances, or to drop into the earliest available opening at the end of the line. This is the gravitational force exerted by righteousness, and the simple, enormous depth behind the choice to wait.

It is an interesting conundrum to write about this principle as a virtue – as righteousness quantifies and defines itself as being *morally right*.² It does not demonstrate an example of this morality, such as kindness – rather, it is the very sum and state of that good. Nebulous at best, with centuries of thinkers trying to capture it.

However, like many of those who have come before me, I do not believe that such a thing exists as a plane of inaccessible existence, with only the rich with the luxury and means to fly

into that airspace. Rather, it is a space to enter and leave, to navigate and explore and enjoy and get lost in at times, and always with at some cost; a series of incremental choices and offerings, small and large.

In this battle on an expressway connecting boroughs, one I've fought over and over again, there are always choices. Choices to rush ahead to chase the very last possibility of turning into the lane. Choices to devour that single inch of space before the next car, forcing the driver's attention to the road as they push their abused brakes to accommodate your massive truck.

People make many each day, and our hearts are often moved to act by this very thing – stories. In an age that idolizes and digitally immortalizes an individual's story, we have thousands recounting both ocean and man-birthered destruction at the hands of natural disaster and national injustice. In response to this devastation, a close friend texted me this reminder: "*The world is full of miserable places. One way of living comfortably is not to think about them or, when you do, to send money.*"³

Many send donations because they can imagine the ones on the other side, or know loss, or some to post a receipt on social media. Perhaps the virtue leading them in that time is charity, or love, or kindness.

However, I believe we must exercise righteousness not because another will benefit, or gain – but because what we have is not ours.⁴ Righteousness exists apart from human stories, human emotions, or human time.⁵ My choice to wait remains, regardless of an ability (or lack of one) to sympathize, hear, and understand the situations of each person on that line, not even a single one. My time is not mine to protect, violently. My money is not mine to guard jealously. My heart is not mine to close. Any price that I pay when I choose to act rightly, I offer willingly.

The world becomes a miserable place where we constantly encounter this maddening, twisting ugliness that all humans know intimately. It erupts when we identify that there is no common or basic good, no right that binds us together and is called worthy unless it is popular or public or easy.

I like to believe that our educated nation entirely understands that there is a cost when we choose to do good, which is why so many hesitate to do it while discussing why they should. In a system where the privileged dig their heels into their nets and holdings and analyses, people at the end of the line keep waiting. A single moment in traffic is one opportunity of many to choose, and not just justify, one small distance. Not because it will change this, or help them. Just because.

¹ Jessica Leigh Hester, *Is Garbage a Product of Bad Design?*, (Citylab, 2017), Retrieved from <https://www.citylab.com/environment/2017/10/zero-waste-design-guidelines/543369/>.

² Oxford Living Dictionary, Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/righteous>.

³ Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Over Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer*, (Random House, 2003), 8.

⁴ Holy Bible, Parable of the Talents, Matthew 25:14-30.

⁵ John Grey, *Benedict De Spinoza: Moral Philosophy*, (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy), Retrieved from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/spin-mor/>.

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