

I got a carbon-frugal car to save the earth - and if mankind survives as well, there's nothing I can do

Drivers felt the need to overtake me. 'What would Jesus drive?' I wanted to shout

Shalom Auslander
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A few months ago, I decided to save the earth. Maybe it was something Al Gore said. Maybe it was something Leonardo DiCaprio said. Maybe it was just the high gas prices and the weakening dollar. Whatever it was, two weeks later I was at a car dealership near where I live in upstate New York, trading in my glacier-melting, atmosphere-wrecking, gas-guzzling American pick-up truck for a pocket-sized, carbon-frugal, 35 mile-per-gallon Japanese econobox. And you know something? It felt good. It felt right. It felt as if simply by getting into that car, just by turning the key and pulling into traffic, I was doing something good for mankind.

My goodwill passed quickly. I was somehow both saving mankind and bringing out the worst in him.

"Move your ass!" called the driver of an SUV that swerved around me.

"Get a real car, jackass," shouted the driver of a pick-up truck as he sped by.

If the effect my car was having on the planet was to reduce my contribution to the accumulation of dangerous gasses in its atmosphere, the effect it was having on the planet's inhabitants was an overwhelming need to overtake, regardless of how quickly I was already going. If I was doing 40 mph, they'd go by at 45. If I was doing 45, they'd go by at 50. If I was doing 70, they'd pull up beside me, look over, shake their heads and speed off at 80.

They cut me off. They veered into me. They gave me the finger. It didn't make any sense. I was only trying to help. I was suffering for them, didn't they realise that? I was the Jesus of Blacktop, the Christ of Concrete. "My sloth will save thee!" I wanted to shout. What would Jesus drive?

I began to regret my decision. And I began to get angry. Save mankind? What had I been thinking? I hate mankind. Everyone does. Why do you think aliens always circle around and leave?

I hated my new car. I hated Japan. I wanted a gas-guzzler. I wanted a car with negative miles per gallon. I wanted a Ford F-150. I wanted a Ford F-350. I wanted a Ford F-550, with an extra engine strapped to the top that didn't even attach to anything, it just ran continuously, all day and all night, doing nothing but spreading toxins and poison into the atmosphere of a planet full of people I loathed. I wanted a car that ran on CFCs, and I wanted to drive it across the planet with "Bite me, mankind," written across the back window. And when, a few weeks later, I returned home, all mankind would be gone and I would laugh and laugh and choke and die. Happily.

And then, a week or so later, spring arrived. Just beyond the sun-filled windows of my bedroom, bright red cardinals and haughty black crows sang their favourite songs as the eager buds of a nearby maple shook their bright green heads in the warm morning breeze. I hurried outside, climbed into my car, opened all the windows and went for a drive. All around, the earth was awakening, coming to life and, suddenly, my car felt right again. And I felt good again. And I was happy again. Because I realised that what I had set out to do was save the earth; if mankind happened to survive, too, well, there was nothing I could do about that.

An hour later, and many more miles further than my pick-up would have gone, I stopped at a gas station for a refill and a cup of coffee.

"What in the hell you call that?" asked the driver of the SUV that pulled up beside me.

"What do I call what?" I ask.

"That," he said.

"I call it a car."

He shook his head. "My truck craps bigger'n that," he said.

His friend laughed, slapped him on the back and they peeled out, spinning their tyres and leaving behind a thick cloud of dust and sinister smoke.

Nope. Nothing I could do about that at all.

- A few days ago, someone running for president of the United States suggested that blue-collar people in America are bitter. Two other bitter people, both of whom also happen to be running for president and neither of whom happen to be blue collar, denied that blue-collar people were bitter. They said it was elitist to say that blue-collar people were bitter, and both expressed their bitterness about the elitism they believed they were hearing.

The bitter feud grew all weekend until yesterday, when it finally made its way to the bitter mainstream media, which spent the day wondering whether the people who were allegedly bitter were actually bitter, or whether they were just bitter about the bitterness allegations. Bitter bloggers, rushing to the defence of their bitter candidates, complained bitterly - some were bitter about the suggestion that blue-collar people were bitter, and some were bitter about the reaction to the suggestion that blue-collar people were bitter.

By this morning, the whole bitter episode was being called Bittergate, and all the news programmes, on all the news channels, spent all afternoon preparing Bittergate logo designs in time for the evening news. And people wonder why I'm bitter.

- Marcel Berlins is away

- **This week** Shalom read **Kafka: Letters to Friends, Family and Editors**: "Every book I read about Kafka makes me pity him, except this one, which made me pity his friends, family and editors." **He has also read** the readers' posts on Comment is Free: "Afterwards, I gave my three-year old son a hug and apologised for bringing him into this world."