

The Transition



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On Thanksgiving Day, a nation at peace, stuffed with turkey and obsessed with dimpled chads, didn't even notice a little transition that took place here in our corner of the world. It was a transition that, unlike the presidential transition, was remarkable for its smoothness. It caused no disruption and barely registered as an event to most of the DC metro area inhabitants. That Thursday, the famed trains of Washington's showcase transit system returned to automatic control. Once again, as for most of their 25-year history, no one is driving the Metro trains.

The trains were designed to be controlled by a central computer, which controls the speed, timing and the distance between trains. A series of relays communicate with the central computer and tell it where the trains are and the computer makes adjustments as necessary. The result is a quiet ride whose starts and stops are so gentle that it is barely necessary to hold on when the train is moving. The sole job of the operator is to announce the name of the stations and to holler at people who try to get on the train when the doors are closing. Up until a year or two ago, the operator would actually announce that the doors were closing. Now however, a generically female, mechanical voice commands, "Please, stand clear of the doors! Doors are closing!" Her voice is slightly irritated like your mother's voice when you tracked mud on the kitchen floor.

Then in April of 1999 as unprecedented numbers of tourists and visitors descended on the city to enjoy the spring colors, the relays began to fail. After a few near misses, the transit board decided to take the computer off line. They turned control of the trains over to the operators most of whom had last driven a metro bus in heavy traffic before they had gotten promoted to the less stressful job of hollering at door blockers.

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Suddenly the smooth ride we had known was replaced with bumps, jolts and sudden starts and stops. What was worse, the system became dramatically less reliable. All that spring and into the summer there were delays, breakdowns, and station closings. Commuters become so frustrated that one day when ordered to leave a malfunctioning train by the harried operator, they refused to do so, tying up the system for hours.

But within a few months, as the *drivers* learned to better control the trains, break smoothly, and judge the distance between trains, the ride smoothed out again. The system more or less returned to normal. But I soon

noticed something else. The now drivers' voices seemed more cheerful and spirited as they called out the names of the stations. Many would remind passengers to "take your newspapers and other personal belongings with you when leaving the train." Even the mechanical "door closing" voice seemed more friendly. I imagined the whole system was shaking off the slumber of automatic control. A sense of wonder was in the air and it pulsed from the massive air chillers filling that immaculate concrete dungeon with a new air of vitality and renewal.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed that the Metro's auto control was an apt metaphor for our lives. Our goal is to put every aspect of our lives on autopilot. Cars are equipped with cruise control, our heating and cooling systems have thermostats that can't be changed, car doors lock when we place the automatic transmission in the drive position. Windows can't be opened. To the extent possible, we have attempted to remove all human judgement from the equation. Human judgement is too subjective, too prone to error, too risky. Better to let a machine handle it. You can trust a machine to be objective. In fact, saying that someone is judgmental is about the worst criticism that you can have of someone nowadays (without using bad language). There is no higher praise than to say that someone is "nonjudgmental." Didn't judgement used to be a characteristic that distinguished humans from other life forms?

And we are just seeing the tip of the iceberg. Soon there will be "smart" appliances. Alarm clocks that talk to your coffee maker. A refrigerator that tells you to buy milk. Answering machines that call other machines and leave detailed messages. A freezer that knows when you leave work and starts defrosting your dinner.

Back in less rote times, on or around January 1, many people would pause to take stock of the past year and ponder how they might make the coming year more productive, enjoyable or better in some way. Now you can download a program that will make your resolutions for you and synch them with your palmtop computer. You don't even have to review them and it is probably better that you don't. We have put our lives on automatic control. We cruise down the track of life looking neither left nor right. Once in a while we yell at those idiots who are blocking the doors. It makes us feel alive.

There was a popular movie made about this phenomenon a few years back, *Groundhog Day* with Bill Murray. In the film, Murray plays Phil, a weatherman totally bored with every aspect of his life. Drained of his vitality and weighed down by broken dreams, Phil lives in a world where every day seems the same. And then one February 2nd he wakes up to find that every day *is* the same. It is Groundhog Day, the worst day of his life, again and again and again. But eventually, he learns that every day, regardless of its outward guise, is, in fact, a new beginning. It is a chance to learn something and to grow. Each day is a gift that flies down to greet us one by one and we make a choice of how we will use this gift. The days once spent are irretrievable, but the fabric made of the spent days, create the garment of our lives. We never know when a day flies down, if it will be our last.

So forget about losing weight, making more money, or joining the health club. Dispense with the tired resolutions you've made automatically year after year and this year make and keep just one. To live each day, even each moment, as fully as you possibly can. Take off the cruise control and *drive* the train for a change. The ride will be a bit bumpier but perhaps you will find it more meaningful. But don't wait, the doors are closing.

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