

FIRST PERSON

Seattle cars have horns; just use them

BRUCE H. RANSOM

Guest columnist

Recent reviews of the worst traffic in the country place Seattle near the top. I contend that this otherwise most livable city has such bad traffic because Seattleites are too polite.

We Seattleites are mostly transplants from different lands and cultures, herded into the farthest corner of the continental United States. Worse still, Seattle is not the melting pot we claim. We are many separate pots on the fire, with little slopping over of the contents from one pot to the next. As a result, our interactions tend to be tentative and hesitant. We call this being polite, but the net effect is to inhibit an open transfer of ideas and information.

On the other hand, people on the East Coast—say, New York City—tend to have lived in their neighborhood for generations, and have developed and adopted the unwritten customs and social skills that guide their daily interactions.

What does this have to do with Seattle traffic? Take honking. I've driven in Seattle virtually my entire adult life, with sojourns driving in Manhattan, New Jersey, Boston

and other cities on the East Coast. In Seattle no one honks. The light turns green; the car in front of you doesn't move, but you don't honk. Nor does anyone behind you. We're all being polite.

Maybe on the next light cycle, if there's still no movement, someone in line transporting a passenger in mid-birth will break down and gently depress their horn in an attempt to emit an ever-so-brief "beep." The person in front of you will then lift their head from reading the newspaper, dialing their cell phone, meditating or some combination thereof, and discover that the light is green. In time it will dawn on them that movement of their vehicle in a forward direction is in order, but before doing so, they will look in their rearview mirror and enthusiastically wave at you, taking care to form a full hand wave, lest the honker erroneously perceive a highly impolite single-digit wave.

In contrast, in Manhattan and the rest of the northeast a car horn is an essential part of the vehicle, on par with the brakes. Everyone honks, but the action invariably conveys useful information ("Hey, I'm ova heeeah buddy!") and no one takes offense. Occasionally someone will yell back in response to being honked at, but it's really only their way of saying, "OK, OK, I heeeah ya." Sort of New

York's version of the Seattle full-handed wave.

In this way Manhattan drivers express themselves, the traffic moves and business gets taken care of. Unfortunately in Seattle our real feelings are internalized, road rage is epidemic and our traffic is some of the worst in the nation. It makes me so mad!

Before my first trip to New York, I had, of course, read about its notorious traffic and had seen the relevant movies. I was apprehensive about driving where everyone else apparently drove like Popeye Doyle. But in no time I had shed my ultra-polite, namby-pamby Seattle driving persona. Soon I, too, was honking my horn right along with everyone else, gleefully contributing to this great cacophony of moving, honking vehicles, all proceeding happily on our way. It was so refreshing!

So for Seattle's traffic woes, my recommendation is simple: Just honk! The light turns green; the guy in front of you doesn't move; lay on it! He'll be shocked into movement, will even forget to wave—saving additional time—the traffic will flow, and he, you and the rest of us will get somewhere. But if he doesn't, duck!

Bruce H. Ransom lives in Seattle.

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