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Bicycles, Bridge-Building, and Commuting Intentionally: A Review of Saving Us

Abstract

"When faced with problems of an enormous scale, it's hard to believe that anything we do individually can make a difference."

Posting about the book *Saving Us* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/bicycles-bridge-building-and-commuting-intentionally-a-review-of-saving-us/>

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Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.

Bicycles, Bridge-Building, and Commuting Intentionally: A Review of *Saving Us*

Jason Ho

April 13, 2022

Title: *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World*

Author: Katharine Hayhoe

Publisher: Atria/One Signal Publishers

Publishing Date: September 21, 2021

Pages: 320 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1982143831

This article combines a book review with our ongoing series: Living with Intentionality. Our lives are a series of decisions of how best to love others, care for our creation, seek good, prevent harm, and glorify God. We will highlight these articles where fellow believers make very intentional choices that can expand our imagination for what the Christian life—and the life of the mind—can accomplish.

My wife Sara and I have so far only needed one vehicle. Sure, sometimes there's tension as we try to reconcile our schedules, but after 10 years of marriage, it has never been an insurmountable problem. While I was a graduate student at the University of Saskatchewan, my student union provided all students with a bus pass, and I lived right on a bus route that went directly to the university. Buying a second vehicle never seemed like an attractive option from an economic perspective, even though it would have been more convenient.

Then winter came.

The buses still ran in the winter, but often not on schedule. Sometimes I wasn't sure if a bus was 20 minutes late, or if the next bus was just a few minutes early. This would have only been an annoyance, if it didn't mean that I would be waiting outside in -40°C, desperately trying to stay warm until my bus came. Around this same time, my brother Josh had moved nearby, and he was thinking through the same problem that I was—how to minimize the economic impact of owning a vehicle.

Even in the winter, Josh would frequently go through less than a tank of gas a month. He'd bike everywhere he could—anywhere within six or seven miles. He'd bike for groceries. He'd bike in snow or in -40°C. Maybe it was a deep-seated pride that wouldn't allow my younger brother to show me up, or maybe it was something more noble, but I began to see a solution to my problem that didn't involve purchasing another vehicle. So, I weighed the pros and cons.

Pros:	Cons:
I'm in control of my own schedule	I'm committing to the commute no matter the weather
Buses have bike racks, so I can take the bus if I change my mind	I can't carry as much as with a vehicle
I get some exercise every day	Biking can be dangerous in a car-centric city
Biking is normally cheaper than driving	
Car engines are energetically inefficient	

As a physicist, it's the last point that really interested me. It turns out that once you account for the energy lost to friction, heat, and engine exhaust, the gasoline engines in the cars that we see on the road only use 20-35% of the input energy to operate the vehicle. That means that if you buy \$50 worth of gas, only \$15 of that goes towards moving you from point to point, and the rest of it is wasted.

It also turned out that things I thought might be downsides weren't all that bad. In Saskatchewan, biking to work took the same amount of time as a bus ride. On winter days, I had to spend a little more care in making sure I wore a warm base layer of clothing, but once I started pedaling, I would warm up quickly. In Sioux Center, it takes me just as long to warm up the car and scrape the ice off my windshield as it does to bike to Dordt. And I *never* have to worry about finding a parking spot.

When faced with problems of an enormous scale, it's hard to believe that anything we do individually can make a difference. In *Saving Us*, Katherine Hayhoe gives two reasons why she pursues low-carbon habits in her life: because she believes that prioritizing creation care is the right thing to do, and because it inspires her and helps spark inspiration in others.

Biking to work every day won't solve climate change. But if I believe that careful stewardship is the right thing to do, then I need to ask questions of myself about how I use my resources. These resources could be money, time, or the strain I put on the world around me. It's certainly normal to drive a car around town—but is it always necessary? These questions of stewardship are questions we consider in our own context and season of life. I'm not sure my reasons will convince anyone to bike year-round, nor do I think everyone should.

Saving Us is centered around the topic of climate change, but it is about how to find common ground with others, and how to focus on ways we can unite instead of divide. One clear example in *Saving Us* is Hayhoe's encounter with Tom, an engineering professor at Queen's College Cambridge. In their first meeting, Tom was aggressive, clearly provoked from her stances on climate science. He vehemently disagreed with the conclusions she presented, that scientists could definitively *know* that the climate was changing, and human beings were responsible. I'm sure both left the encounter never wanting to see the other ever again. But in fact, within a year later, they found themselves attending the same conference together, this time bonding over a shared interest in knitting. Tom went on describing his convictions about sustainability, recycling and repurposing wherever possible, and emphasizing relational living. Hayhoe reflects on his (unintentionally) low-carbon lifestyle, and then says to him:

"I know we disagree about what climate science is telling us about our planet. But I'd rather everyone thought the same way you do, and lived the same way you do, than agreed with me but lived the way many of them do."

Hayhoe and Tom the engineer viewed sustainability through very different lenses, but ultimately agreed about the intention and action that should be taken to build a better world. *Saving Us* is about intention and relationship in the context of creation care. It's easy to get caught up in our own beliefs and dig trenches on our side of an ideological battleground. Hayhoe encourages us to put our shovels down and build bridges instead. We're not out to conquer other people in the hopes of winning points for our side, but to come alongside them and draw attention to how we care about the same things. There is an urgency in caring for an Earth that we've damaged over the centuries, but we can hold that urgency while also growing in relationship with the people around us.

Mirroring Hayhoe's second reason of pursuing low-carbon habits because they inspire herself and others, I made the decision to make biking a primary form of transportation because I saw someone I respected doing it. My brother Josh took the time to share his experience with me, and how he saw his actions aligning with his beliefs. So, perhaps it's our relationships with people that end up making the difference. There's no way I can always consistently live out all the beliefs I hold. But I can live a life that strives to align more authentically with my convictions, and I can share my decisions with others when I'm asked. When people ask how or why I bike through the Iowan winters, it gives me an opportunity to build a bridge towards a more meaningful conversation.