

Welcome to the Hub, land of peculiar gaits

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ABSTRACT

Given your ostensible willingness to risk it all, what kind of savage would close the doors and leave you behind? I got used to all this flapping, lurching variation on the theme of getting from here to there, and I came to regard it as the result of certain local cultural tendencies: the Yankee tradition of tinkering to improve on conventional ways of doing things; independence from standard definitions of looking silly that prevail everywhere else but here; and, of course, sheer cussedness.

FULL TEXT

WHEN I first moved here 13 years ago, people would ask me how I liked it and I would say I liked it fine. I still do. Boston is old and many-layered, and it's not just like everywhere else; the more you explore, the more you discover. And you can get around without a car, which for me is important, since sitting in traffic makes me feel as if my internal organs are swelling.

As I settled into life here, I began to notice widespread and diverse peculiarities in how people actually do get around under their own power. I first lived in Huron Village in Cambridge, and I got used to seeing certain characters. There were, for example, the Lean and Hungry Tiny Steps People, a gaunt couple who had apparently made a study of running and concluded that 6-inch strides were the key to efficient exercise. There was Witness Protection Man, who carried a big stick and wore shades and a parka, no matter what the weather. And there was the Rabbit Man of Cambridge, who walked at a terrific pace in the bike lane with an air of barely suppressed desperation, his upper body drastically levered forward from the hips. The Rabbit Man ate carrots and lettuce leaves while on the move, and a kind of hush traveled with him. I'd feel the encroaching stillness and turn to spot him cresting a rise on the avenue, approaching like a prophesied event.

There was further peculiarity on two wheels, and on three - recumbent tricyclists who pedaled and hand-signaled with a righteous air of ergonomic superiority. And on four: Drivers shouted empty threats or perhaps cries of distress as they swerved their cars and honked. It was hard to tell whether they were trying to avoid bikers, trikers, and pedestrians or trying, ineptly, to run them down.

The daily spectacle was quietly astonishing. To run along Huron Avenue and around Fresh Pond was to catch a glimpse of what a nerve-gas attack might look like in its early stages.

After a few years I moved across the river, where I encountered a new form: the Green Line Mock Panic. This is the dreamy, ground-skimming faux-sprint that a would-be T rider will employ to cross a busy street to get to a train already at the stop. It's not really a sprint at all, since to throw yourself headlong into traffic is even foolhardier in Boston than it would be elsewhere in America. The Green Line Mock Panic, rather, is a kind of mime-show in which you accelerate negligibly from walking speed while performing a slow-motion parody of running all-out. You

thereby put approaching drivers on the defensive and exert moral leverage on the train's motorman. Given your ostensible willingness to risk it all, what kind of savage would close the doors and leave you behind?

I got used to all this flapping, lurching variation on the theme of getting from here to there, and I came to regard it as the result of certain local cultural tendencies: the Yankee tradition of tinkering to improve on conventional ways of doing things; independence from standard definitions of looking silly that prevail everywhere else but here; and, of course, sheer cussedness.

I didn't think it had anything to do with me. I wasn't from here. I got around the normal way, just as I spoke standard American English without quaint regional flourishes.

But recently, after a run with a friend, the friend said, "You ever notice that you run with your elbows out, like you were protecting your food in prison?" No, I hadn't, but it reminded me of something my wife had said a couple of weeks before: "You know how you talk about the way people run in Cambridge? Well, you kind of run funny, too."

They're probably right, and I'm not going to worry about it. It's entirely possible that living here has done something to the way I run. Or maybe I always had within me the latent possibility of developing an odd gait, which drew me, subconsciously, to Boston, where I'd fit in when the oddness blossomed.

Well, it has apparently blossomed. After 13 years, I may have arrived. You live around here and you run funny? So don't I.

Carlo Rotella, a guest columnist, is director of American Studies at Boston College.

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Illustration

Caption: BBC

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