

In traveling circle of life, mile markers elude us

By Sara Hunter

It wasn't the two kids slouched in the back seat, rolling their eyes, that dampened my spirit. Nor could the cat yowling from somewhere under the gear shift drown out my ritual, celebration honk as six new odometer digits rolled into view. What sent me into a skid from

which I have yet to fully recover was the realization that we've had this car only a year and the farthest I've driven is to Medford. How could I possibly have covered 20,000 miles within a 20-mile radius? Heck, the circumference of the globe is only 24,901 miles, a number we could have easily hit if my son hadn't quit marimba lessons.

I drop off the cat for a haircut, Abby at hiphop, and John at a squash match, then race to my office to try to make sense of a life journey that appears to be going in circles.

Turning to the most homebound of my writer role models for solace, I remember that Emily Dickinson published 1,800 poems while barely leaving the backyard. Cool! If I write a poem every 10

miles, I'll catch up within the year. I wonder if anyone will pay to read about Route 16 gridlock or McDonald's drive-through disasters.

Next, I locate Eudora Welty's core truth about the "sheltered life": "All serious daring starts from within [a car]." I justify this slight edit with the knowledge that Eudora never traveled the

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Route 128 breakdown lane during rush hour. After all, where else but in a car would a 13-year-old girl dare sit so close to her mother in public? Where else could I dare dream of achieving invisibility to glean more than grunts about my son's day?

Where but in the car would I dare barter for the chance to belt out "Midnight Train to Georgia."

This newfound sense of daring lasts until I look up from my desk to see my old nursery school 300 yards from my office window. In an instant, 20,000 miles expands by a factor of decades and my 20-mile radius shrinks to a 1-mile orbit between Dover and South Natick.

It's 1962, I am 8, lost in a stack of picture books driving home

from the library — the same library I walked to yesterday for inspiration for a children's book I'll submit in 2002.

It's 1972, and my style-conscious sister glowers from the window of the junior high bus as I sit on my stalled motorcycle looking like Fearless Fly. In 1984, my sleep-deprived students give me the same look as I trail the bus to the same school to teach English.

It's a Friday night in 2001. My daughter is rehashing the highs and mostly "annoying" lows of a school dance. As we pass my old driveway, I picture my parents waving goodbye from the rosy shadows of the pink and white tent of my backyard wedding reception.

Back to nursery school, this time 1991. My mother watches

my son proudly receive his preschool diploma as she must have watched me so many years ago.

The backdrop has remained consistent, but I realize the daily drama of the ride has been anything but.

While not breaking much new ground, I've sure worn some grooves in the pavement.

In several years, the two main reasons I've logged 20,000 miles in this car will be grown and gone, and there will be loads of time for my husband and me to circumnavigate the globe. My guess is that the allure of far-flung places will be nothing compared to the pull of the concentric circles leading home.

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