

This is where I was when I received the phone call that changed my life. I was on my daily walk to a coffee shop when I got accepted to EIS. This random nurse was going to be a CDC epidemiologist. Since moving to Atlanta, people ask me all the time, "Heather, how do you like it here?" My response? "I hate Atlanta."

I thought I was moving to a bustling, innovative international city of the South. I never had culture shock like this. Living in Boston for ten years, I never feared for my life when walking to and from everyday destinations. I wasn't forced to walk near feet next to cars moving 40mph.

I'm not a driver. I'm a walker. I have epilepsy and I don't drive. If I'm trying to get somewhere, I use my feet. This is the other side of the street. I was just showing you. Streets have been designed to prioritize cars when sidewalks are blocked, not wide enough, not maintained, or when there's no sidewalk at all. Pedestrians have to walk in the street in direct conflict with cars.

Some things are wrong, but when they're wrong long enough, they become tradition. They become accepted and unquestioned. I don't want to walk on this street, but I have to. I'm not alone. 30% of U.S. residents do not have a driver's license. Kids, low income, disabled, and eventually everyone in this room. When we become elderly. Atlanta pedestrians, you and I are seven times more likely to be hit by a vehicle than Boston pedestrians.

Let's take a walk in my neighborhood and see for ourselves. We'll stick to the side of the road here because there's no sidewalk on either side. We're going to pick up some dinner. Normally, my boyfriend cooks my meals, but his dad's on hospice care, so he hasn't been living with me since October. This is the most transportation independent I've had to be in my adult life.

We're approaching Peachtree Road. It's part of Atlanta's high injury network. These are roads that account for 70% of serious crashes in the city. If you look down, you can see Stewart and Jake in the crosswalk. You can imagine how wheelchair could get stuck in there. We're accustomed to tripping hazard for someone with a cane.

Across the street is an elementary school. My neighborhood is trying to get this area to be a school zone to reduce the speed limit here to 20mph and repeat the crosswalk. Today, only 10% of kids walk to school as compared to 40% in 1970. The road design is forcing kids to be dependent on parents and delaying independence. If this street becomes safe to walk on for kids, it's then safe for everyone, including us.

Right now. All right, the walk signal here is 20 seconds, which is fine for me, but for the elderly or others, it might not be enough time. Also, keep in mind we're sharing the time with cars who want to turn right. So if I feel like they aren't paying attention to me, I'll just let them go ahead. I'd rather not get hit.

Even though the law is for vehicles to yield to pedestrians, they rarely ever do. As we walk, notice if you feel comfortable, if you feel safe. Just because these drivers own a car, it doesn't mean your life as the pedestrian is less important. Luckily, there is a sidewalk here. It's rare, but sometimes there will be a car parked on the sidewalk.

As someone with epilepsy, every time I walk here, I think thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers. If I'm alone and I seize, that could be it for me. I don't have control over my body. If I'm feeling off like I might have a seizure, I might do this walk anyway. I'm not going to hide away in my house.

It's been so far, so good for me. But it's a gamble. Every time. Now this road looks like a six-lane racetrack. Why are people speeding? Well, because it was designed for speed. It was no accident. It was designed for so-called efficiency. But more lanes attract more drivers, which creates more traffic and negates the original goal of efficiency.

So now we have this wide road with cars moving so fast that pedestrians and cyclists can't safely use it, and people in cars can't get places on time. So we'll speed ahead here. Pick up some dinner and walk back home. See, I like to stand back from the curb when I can, just to keep myself out of the road if I were to seize and fall.

Because driving efficiency time is the priority over your life. As the pedestrian, keep your head on a swivel and be prepared for the unexpected. Remember an American culture. We ask everyone outside the car to be safe. So drivers can be dangerous.

All right, so here can be a little tricky. I'm not sure if this car will let us walk across the sidewalk, but there's a lot of road traffic. So I'm just going to go for it. Even though the car's pushing us to the edge of the road. If you take anything from this talk, remember there are no accidents.

Remove that word from your vocabulary. What happens is a crash that could have been prevented by accident, implies bad luck, and implies that nobody, including the traffic engineer, is to blame. But the road design is no accident. It's dangerous by design. Most pedestrians will survive being hit at 20mph. But what roads are designed for that speed in Atlanta?

We'll head back to the house now with our dinner. Notice that the sidewalk just abruptly ends. So let's check our cars behind us before we walk into the street.

Good thing that we checked. The burden is always on the pedestrian to watch out for their own safety. Anyway, we've made it back.

A lot of people tell me, Heather, you won't have to be a walker for long. Soon we'll have self-driving cars.

It doesn't matter who or what is steering the wheel or the energy source of the car. If the road is designed for traffic and congestion, it will be unsafe for walkers and inefficient for people in cars. Personally, I don't feel freedom when I'm in an Uber stuck in traffic.

Americans have been conditioned into a romanticized fixation of car ownership. As Dodge put it in a 2015 advertisement, "We don't have to worry about predators like our ancestors did. There are no monsters to fear. So we have to build our own. 707 horsepower. Torque. Truck speed. Two oh six miles per hour. Dodge predators." Perhaps a good way to sell cars is to make it unsafe, inconvenient, unpleasant, and difficult to do anything but drive.

But, Heather, walkability is only for those fancy Europeans. The Netherlands wasn't always a cyclist's paradise before the car. Amsterdam was walkable. During the 1970s, oil embargo, volunteers fiercely rallied for prioritizing safe walking and biking. These changes didn't happen overnight. It took decades of protest from various volunteer groups. Parents were fed up with increasing child mortality from vehicles. Historical societies and university students protected cultural sites in city identity from destruction.

The Netherlands faced the same challenges that Atlanta faces today. To create a safe, walkable city, streets should hold space for social and economic exchange. So this not that. There should be a variety of transit options connected to where people live and where they want to go. So this not that street design should be to the human scale, not the car.

So that's not that. This is Peachtree Street in 1928. That is Peachtree Street now. My new neighborhood in Atlanta, Peachtree Hills, has attracted carless wonders like me since 1990. Back then, though, on Peachtree Hills Avenue they had 17,000 cars per day using the One Mile Street as a thoroughfare.

I was attracted to live here because since 1995, unpaid volunteers sacrificed years of their free time to transform this one-mile thoroughfare into a comfortable and safe walk to Lindburg Marta station. They

lowered the speed limit, narrowed lanes to ten feet, and with installed a traffic calming island. Narrowed Kings Circle intersection. Installed six pedestrian speed tables. Nine landscaped curb extensions and connected the sidewalk from start to end.

I get to enjoy this comfortable walk because volunteers met twice a week for hours at a time, for one year, with mediators and partners to make safe walkability. My reality.

Despite this effort, many roads in Atlanta still look like this. So, Heather, why don't you just move back to Boston? Well, you're staring at someone living their wildest dreams, working in physical activity and promoting my life. Passion of sports and movement. Atlanta is a great place, but it has so much potential to be even better.

My challenge to you: Learn about what's going on in your community in Atlanta. There are neighborhood planning units. Do you walk and use your feet? Run an errand without a car. Share your experience. Believe in your wildest dreams. Sometimes they come true. Thank you.