

Ride on

It's tempting to flee the monotony of daily life. But there's value in staying committed.

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August 20, 2025



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On a hot and humid day this summer, I jumped on a bus from downtown Detroit to nearby Wayne State University. Because the doors opened at every stop, the air-conditioning struggled to keep pace. The driver was soaked in sweat. I needed help identifying my stop, so I struck up a conversation with him. His hunched-over lean on the steering wheel indicated to me what decades of driving over potholes must do to a person's musculoskeletal system. He told me about how some passengers

can be so kind and others so mean. Something about his disposition told me that bus drivers are indispensable to a city's vigor, however monotonous the work appears to be.

The brief encounter reminded me of the story of a New York City bus driver who disappeared with his bus in the 1940s. The daily annoyances of guiding the same bus down the same streets finally took their toll. So when William Cimillo climbed behind the wheel of his red #1310 bus one March morning, he drove it out of the bus barn and then out of town. An interstate all-points bulletin went out for the missing bus. Nobody, not even Cimillo's family and friends, had any idea where he might be headed. Thirteen hundred miles later and out of money, he finally turned himself in to Florida authorities. "I wanted to get away from everything," he said of his longing to escape. "New York traffic just gets to you."

Though Cimillo returned home to a criminal indictment for grand larceny, an avalanche of supportive letters also began to arrive. Many letter writers pleaded for leniency, noting the tedium of their own jobs. Some made it clear they would've loved to jump on board with him, had they only been tipped off in time. In short order, Cimillo became a celebrity, receiving something of a hero's welcome whenever he appeared in public. His bus-driving buddies raised enough money to cover his legal fees.

Joseph Brodsky, the Russian-born poet and essayist who later emigrated to the United States, delivered Dartmouth College's commencement address in 1989. "You will inevitably be afflicted by monotony," he told the graduates. "You'll be bored with your work, your friends, your spouses, your lovers, [and even] the view from your window. . . . Accordingly, you'll try to devise ways of escape." He went on, though, to speak of the value of boredom, its lesson of life about our "utter insignificance," and the search for meaning that can result from coming to terms with anguishing circumstances.

At a conference in Canada this summer, I couldn't help but notice the number of Americans joking with each other and with locals about wanting to ditch the United States and apply for Canadian citizenship. A mass exodus from the political chaos, daily threats to judicial independence, and strong-arm tactics coming out of the White House has yet to materialize. But the chatter was robust and, at times, funny. The secret of wanting to escape from daily realities that are wearing people down was clearly out of the bag.

There are times in life when we have to buckle up and buckle down, lifting one another up with encouragement. Without such commitment, we live with the prospect or fear that our lives will not have mattered. We may not always know if our actions are contributing to an increase of abundant life in this world. But, as Mahatma Gandhi once put it, “if you do nothing, there will be no result.”

As for William Cimillo, the Surface Transportation Corporation of New York City ended up dropping the charges and giving him his job back. Riding his packed bus became something of a sensation, a daily highlight for many in the Bronx. He drove for another 16 years before retiring.