



Gordon Keith: Missing the bus on DART



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Published: 22 August 2013 07:57 PM

Updated: 23 August 2013 07:11 AM

Sometimes before my flight, I'll stand in the airport, in the calm moments after the cattle rush of the security line, and be amazed that with a single purchase I can go anywhere in the world. I'll read city names off the Departures board like they're chapters in an adventure book that mentions me on every page. I could go there. Or there. Or there.

All I need is a credit card, my passport, and the will to go. An undiluted will is such power. You can change your course if you're willing to loosen your grip on the things holding you in your groove. But your groove is a groove for a reason. We follow well-worn paths of least resistance until they become ruts. So I never really jump ship to those farther flung places of romance and reinvention. I just go where I'm supposed to go after they call Group 4.

I moved to Dallas 30 years ago this month. In that first month, the TV hairdos squawked on the news every night about something called DART. I didn't know what DART was, nor did I care. I was a kid consumed with making middle school friends, not municipal bonds or target dates 10, 20, 30 years in the future. I didn't plan on living that long. Thirty years into the future was about seven years after the apocalypse to me. I thought I'd be dead or president by then. And I'd have a jet pack. So no need for a bus.

But 30 years happened, and I never became president, jet-packed, or dead. Instead, DART was built and Dallas kept spreading like a virus. And since D-FW is smeared all the way to Oklahoma now, I have a car.

Routine is a pleasant opiate. I drive the same route to work every morning. I listen to the same station and eat the same breakfast. Sometimes I think of changing it up, but I don't. I don't carpool. I don't ride DART. And I don't order the No. 4 without a hash brown. I do what I've always done. I drive alone with 3 million other loners.

In many parts of town, if you announce, "I want to take DART to work," the telltale response will be "Why?" That word is the shortest explanation of DART's struggles. Why take DART when you don't have to? The buses and trains don't run frequently enough, far enough, quickly enough, or close enough. DART can't correct those problems until enough people ride it. And enough people won't ride it until DART corrects those problems.

There's also a psychological reason beyond the practicality. Cars are our independence. They're our bubbles. They give us a justifiable aloneness in a day filled with the needs of other people. They get us door to door and leave when we want to. Texans are rugged individualists. We like our horses hitched outside and ready to ride at a moment's notice. Life on another man's schedule doesn't sound much like freedom, and nobody likes to share a horse. So we settle into our commuting routines.

The bad part of routine is that it bends your life into one long comfortable blur, like the smeared stars of hyperdrive. So a couple of weekends ago, I bought myself a newspaper and an unlimited day pass on DART. It was my airport fantasy in miniature. Pick a place on the world map of D-FW and just go. I hoped it would spark a desire to use my city's transit regularly.

After studying the schedule, I sweated under a yellow sign at a roaring intersection until a bus came barreling over the hill with its head bobbing like a trail horse. It was seven minutes late, but that didn't lash my excitement. After the self-consciousness of not being an expert at something I've never done before, I tucked my pass back into my pocket, thanked the driver, and took a seat up front. People barely looked up from their disinterest. There was no talking. No nods or smiles. Just white cords streaming out of ears.

It was a bus full of slouch and purpose. The interior was also clean, cold, and nice. I was impressed. A woman in a purple skirt steadied a standing boy between her knees. The boy was chatting to ghosts. When the air brakes hissed and we got moving, the boy and I were the only ones smiling in that swaying bread loaf of refrigerated air and indifference. We still thought of it as an adventure, not a rut.

The next day I took my car to work.

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