

Cycling and Safety

One of the most difficult safety issues that arises between bicyclists and motorists is the classic case of the parked car side door opening at the exact time a bicyclist goes past. This scenario takes precision timing to wreak havoc on a body and bike. The timing can occur relatively easily however. It generally puts a cyclist down eating the pavement in a flash faster than we imagine. It has happened to me twice and I swore I would make sure it never happened again after the first time. Here in the San Francisco Bay Area there are often conflicts between cyclists and the driving population that are perpetuated by an adversarial stance on both sides. I propose that this particular safety problem for cyclists, if thoroughly understood, leaves no one and everyone at fault.

Is it reasonable to expect all drivers getting out of their parked car to look back for cyclists? Probably some cycling groups would say yes. I both drive and cycle and am convinced it is not. There are many many instances a driver gets out of a car when there is no chance that a cyclist could go by (e.g. parking lot, driveway etc.). To look back in all of those other instances when a cyclist could be going by would require a Buddhist presence of awareness that is unrealistic for most people.

What motorists should know is that a cyclist does not want to be riding towards the middle of the road keeping a safe distance in case a door opens. If they did it would be dangerous and would promote much horn blowing and anger on the part of the motorists. As a result it requires that cyclists pay serious attention to whether there is a head in the parked car they are coming up to and then whether there is a head in the next car and then the next one etc. etc. Exhausting!

My proposal is for both motorists and cyclists to become more aware of the problem and maybe at the intersection of this co-awareness is a safer zone for all. Lastly, when it does happen to you as a cyclist try and somehow hold your tongue of wrath or blame and realize the driver is freaked out you are laid out on the pavement. That it is not necessarily either their fault or yours. It is part of moving around on the planet and requires everyone to be more aware of their surroundings and others. A grey rather than a black and white solution,- but probably as good as we have.

To safer cycling,

Alan Tower