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## The road to 'Carmageddon'

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NCR Today

A serene silence enveloped Los Angeles this weekend. For two days, the nation's second largest city felt like a Medieval village on the feast day of its patron saint: quiet, reflective, almost like a prayer.

This sudden solitude grew out of a near-catastrophe half-jokingly dubbed "carmageddon." Construction and repair forced the closing of one of Southern California's main freeway arteries, and for weeks now predictions of disaster have flooded the media: frantic drivers pushed off the 405 would choke adjacent neighborhoods and streets. Emergency vehicles would be mercilessly trapped by the traffic; lives would be lost.

By early last Friday afternoon, an urgent exodus had begun -- workers, many let off early by nerve-racked companies, darted home a heartbeat ahead of the inevitable disaster.

But carmedgeddon never came. Saturday greeted Los Angelenos with a sight not seen since before the invention of the horseless carriage: empty freeways, eight lanes of nothingness in either direction. Wide open avenues and boulevards. Police officers out in force found themselves spending most of the day at the nearest Starbucks or diner.

Citizens trekked to overpasses like groups of aliens dumped on a strange planet -- and took in the remarkable, traffic-less vista. Cool, fresh breezes swept back their hair, as the sounds of birds and the scent of sagebrush rose up from an asphalt normally covered in engine roar and gas exhaust.

Everyone stayed off the roads. People kept close to home. At my house, my daughter and I sat in the backyard and -- imagine this -- read. Actual books. Made from paper. I gloried in this astounding turn of events up until the very moment it occurred to me: wait a minute, I thought, what about every other insane weekend in Los Angeles? Millions of people clog the roads, honk their horns and cut off other drivers --

all in a rush to ... where?

Carmageddon made it obvious: nowhere very important. For a whole weekend, we just stopped -- no trips with the kids to soccer practice in Calabasas, no race to the half-off sale in Century City, no yoga class in Yorba Linda.

And the world kept turning. Yes, it turned a little bit more slowly, wound its way around the sun with just a tad more silence. But no one fell off the thing, and the sky did not come crashing down.

So why? Why do we do what we do to ourselves every other weekend of our lives? Why do we choose to fling ourselves onto gridlocked roads rather than sit with our kids out back with a book? I read a lot of about how the recession has made everyone aware of the ways we overschedule our kids, and overspend our bank-accounts.

Okay then: here's a solution.

There is another planned "carmageddon" next summer, when the final phase of road repair requires another shut-down. I'm looking forward to it -- in the meantime, maybe the city council will pass a carmageddon law: just once a month, let's say, we close a big freeway or two for the weekend. The media helps whip up the panic and stoke the fear -- giving us all a good excuse to stop, put up our feet, and take a deep (exhaust-free) breath.

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