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Going to the top won't get you to bottom of bureaucracy

AdvocateWeekly.com

Thursday, June 29

By Daniel Pearl

Aug. 28, 1986

North Adams Transcript

Editor's note: We are reprinting this story by the late Daniel Pearl in conjunction with a column by Ghanashyam Ojha, Daniel Pearl Fellow from Nepal [See Page 6]. Both experienced travails with the Massachusetts Department of Motor Vehicles in their early days in North Adams, 20 years apart, and both managed to find humor amid their frustration.

NORTH ADAMS - Imagine, please, being stuck in a huge flaw in the system. I mean a crack 30 feet deep, so narrow that nobody will admit it's there.

Now imagine being freed from the crack, and by a fluke coming face to face with the man who helped put you there.

This is how I felt on discovering a note Monday on the top file of my desk: "Alan Mackey, Mass. Commissioner of the Registry of Motor Vehicles, will be here Monday, August 26. We need a story and photo. Joe." Like Ahab with the white whale, I would face my tormentor at last.

Let me explain.

I bought a car, in June, in California. The next day I drove it to Massachusetts, arriving in seven days.

So far, I believe, I had committed no crime (except, perhaps, on a small stretch of highway in Utah, when my car became officially broken in and I had to see if it could exceed 60 mph without crumbling).

I began work here, eagerly awaiting the arrival of my title and license plates from California, whose motor vehicle department has a backlog so long that there is a waiting list to apply to stand in line to request to register.

And I would have gone on waiting in peace had an accident not popped up on the police scanner one day, or had I not foolishly agreed to cover it. But then, at the Transcript, we do not negotiate coverage. The accident was across the street from the police station, and as I turned into the parking lot, I was stopped by an officer.

The officer was just doing his job, and doing it quite well, when he told me he had seen me driving in Massachusetts for over 30 days, and I was therefore unregistered and would have to pay a \$100 ticket and leave the car where it stood until I could register it here.

The next day, I realized I could not register it here: I had no title. The crack, at this point, was plain to me: California was too slow; Massachusetts was too fast. But I assumed there was some way out of it.

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I called the California Department of Motor Vehicles in Sacramento. I called the Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles in Boston. I called the dealer who sold me the car. I called the mayor, my congressman and the state representative who heads the committee that deals with such things. I called my mother.

There was no way out. Massachusetts demanded the title and nothing less. California said that, according to their computer, my title would not be sent for another two weeks. The dealer said he was sorry and he would express mail something-or-other, notarized. The state legislator said the number of people who had ever had the same problem as I was probably five, not a significant voting block. My mother said to quit my job and come home.

Two weeks later, the title arrived and I registered my car, but if you have ever been throttled by a faceless bureaucracy, you will understand the relish with which I introduced myself to Mr. Mackey (the Registrar! In the flesh!) Monday morning. I savored my chance to confront him with The Gross Injustice.

I duly took notes, and Mike Finkle took pictures, as Mr. Mackey explained a new computer system the North Adams office would receive in April, the last month of the Registry's six-month phasing in of high technology.

Then I put down my notepad and began my diatribe. I had repeated my tale in 20 conversations with 12 separate authorities in seven different cities, so I had the act down - complete with "as a citizen of the commonwealth" and "denied me the mode of transportation necessary for my livelihood" and ending with "forced upon me the unwanted role of lawbreaker." You get the idea.

Mr. Mackey looked wounded. (He was wounded. I might add, with a foot injury that he said he had received at another registry office - I can only guess how).

You shouldn't have gone through all that trouble," he said. "You should have called the ombudsman."

The ombudsman? THE OMBUDSMAN? I spent five hours running up a phone bill not seen since the Transcript called James Michener five times in Alaska. I went 10 days without a car. I could have called the ombudsman?

Mr. Mackey almost had my apologies. I was ready to express gratitude that he had hired a person to make an exception for me and pull me out of the crack.

But Mr. Mackey had commenced a Platonic dialogue on my situation with his assistant, William Hutch.

Mr. Mackey said I should have been able to register without a title, provided I had a bill of sale.

Mr. Hutch responded that this provision only holds for automobiles carrying a bank lien.

Mr. Mackey said a manufacturer's statement of origin, along with California's temporary registration, might have sufficed.

Mr. Hutch said that a California temporary registration does not constitute proof of title for the purpose of the Massachusetts registry.

Ah, the evil Mr. Hutch - there is always an extra legality to keep you from your freedom.

The dialogue was all too familiar, and I was thinking about the four stories i had to write before deadline as the men advanced into more and more intricate details of registration law. Mike and I shook their hands and escaped.

It was not until Tuesday afternoon that I was able to bring myself to call the ombudsman.

By my motor's honor, I swear that the following is an accurate transcription of what happened when I dialed 617-727-3800 as per Mr. Mackey's instructions.

"Hello, Registry."

"Hi, I would like to speak to the ombudsman."

"To whom? I didn't get the name."

"The ombudsman."

"Is that a person's name who works here?"

"No, OMBUDSMAN. It's a title."



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"Oh, he works in title!"

"No, no. It's not a name. It's a thing. It's in the dictionary. Ombudsman."

"We're no better off than we were before. Spell it."

"O,M,B,U,D,S,M..."

"N?"

"M as in motor, A, N."

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"No what?"

"Is that all one word?"

"Yes. Ombudsman."

I could see I was getting nowhere, so I scrambled through my notes and actually managed to find a name, Jacqueline Dooley, whom Mr. Mackey had described as "both my hands."

"Let me speak to Jacqueline Dooley."

"One minute."

When I reached Ms. Dooley, after being put on hold and trying to explain myself a few more times, I discovered a helpful, pleasant lady. She said the registry could not do a thing for me, but after I whined a bit, she said the people in title could probably have worked something out by "flagging" my registration.

Now, that's a new one. "Flagging." I had not heard that in any of my conversations with 13 people in seven cities.

She said she was glad that I had called, and she would be sure to share this "flagging" trick with the subordinates I had spoken with when my car was still unregistered.

I decided not to pursue the matter with the people in titles. The thing was moot, after all.

And my conversation with Ms. Dooley had left me with a good feeling I didn't want to jinx. I still was not sure if the bureaucrats could have helped me escape from the crack they had created.

In his early days as a journalist, Daniel Pearl worked with the North Adams Transcript and Berkshire Eagle before achieving distinction at The Wall Street Journal. He was tragically slain by terrorists in Pakistan in January 2002 while working as the Journal's South Asia bureau chief.

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