

The Ultimate Quest

By **FRANK A. PARSONS**

ING ARTHUR'S KNIGHTS had the Holy Grail, Diogenes, the honest man. For Columbus it was the new world. Every man and woman, every era, takes inspiration from the challenge of pursuing a truly great objective.

In Lexington, Virginia, we are united in pursuit of the most ambitious goal of all: the attempt to get as close to where we're going as we possibly can, and still be seated in our car. Our quest is to find the parking place of Ultimate Proximity.

Lexington is a college town – a two-college town, actually – which means that its parking problems are proportionately greater than those of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, by an order of magnitude too great to be calculated.

I work at one of those colleges, and for almost 30 years one of my roles was helping my employer develop new parking strategies. But my most important qualification for declaring my expertise in parking matters is simply that I own and operate



Parking lot at Lee Chapel, soon after a Parsons-led project in 1978 to improve it. Photo from the W&L alumni magazine.

a car. Like everyone who owns a car, that makes me an expert on what everybody else ought to do to provide me with a place to park.

You can put that down as Parsons' Parking Principle No. 1. There are others.

It's never your fault when you get a ticket. If other people were doing their jobs right, you wouldn't be forced to violate regulations to fill your need.

Parking enforcement is essentially a negative proposition. By putting up enough No Parking signs, calling enough tow trucks, and imposing severe-enough penalties, one can discourage, deter, and even prevent unwanted parties from parking in a particular place. But you can make someone park where you want him to only if you have absolute power, and exercise it. At Washington and Lee, we did this by building the new law school out in the woods, so far away from the rest of the campus that its designated parking lot really is as close as you can get to it.

Drivers want to be on the approach side of their destination. Most folks are reluctant to drive beyond and walk back. There is a corollary

Frank Parsons (1928-2016) was the top lieutenant to three W&L presidents. His mandate included new construction, old buildings, communications and parking.

to this Parsons Principle: Drivers are unwilling to park on the next street and walk back around the corner to where they're going. The actual distance from parking spot to destination has nothing to do with it.

If you avoid delineating parking spaces, more often than not you end up with more parking space. A VW Rabbit can always find a nook or cranny to squeeze into, but you compound the problem if you penalize the driver just because the cranny he used wasn't marked off as a space.

Nine times out of 10, it's wrong to use statistics in dealing with parking problems. Like the grains of sand on a shore, leaves in the forest, and feathers on wing, cars and parking spots may, in pure science, have a calculable number, but so what? None of the numbers are believable — or relevant. The only answer to the question "How many cars?" is "Too many"; to "How much parking?" "Not enough."

Finally, getting close depends on how far away you started from. For a spaceship, 92,000 miles away from Neptune was practically a bull's-eye, but if your home is six blocks from the commerce school, you want to park a yard from the door.



UNLESS they result in an action program, those principles are mere observations, of course. What lessons underlie them?

First, fascism doesn't work. Believe me; we've tried it.

Any solution will have to bring demand at least roughly into balance with supply. And it will have to incorporate the concept of one's paying for what one gets. If that sounds like Economics 101, in most of life it is. But in matters of parking, the usual rules don't apply. When the city makes you put a quarter in the meter, you're angry because you consider it

a penalty, not a short-term rental of curbside real estate.

One solution might be to build a parking garage at every major intersection. Using the deep-pockets funding approach, the major institutional sources of congestion — in our case, the two colleges — could be required to pay for most of it, in return for which they would get preferred access. But from the perspectives of economics, business, environmentalism, and urban sociology, this superficially attractive concept is impractical.

In this era of re-engineering and deregulation, a better solution might be to use the hunting-license approach: selling parking rights to a few more folks than there are actually spots.

Republicans can hardly oppose an almost perfect free-market system; and as for Democrats, it was one of them who said "Life is unfair."