**Head on a swivel**

I live in downtown Philadelphia and during the COVID-19 siege I get my exercise by biking around the city. In “normal” times the traffic would be far too heavy to allow this. The streets of course are much more empty now, at any time of the day.

Still, biking in the city is a risky proposition, even with the greatly reduced traffic flow. And the many streets that have designated cycling lanes. I’ve had numerous near-hits. In fact, every time I go out for a ride it seems I have at least one close call.

It could be trying to get around a double-parked UPS truck. A car exiting a CVS parking lot that I don’t see because of cars and trucks parked on the street. Someone runs a yellow or red light. Someone suddenly turns into a side street, forcing me up on the sidewalk. My tires get caught in trolley tracks, threatening to throw me off. One of those accordion double-buses makes a wide turn and I’m back up on the sidewalk.

Speaking of sidewalks, there are miles of sidewalk trails in the city’s Fairmount Park. Trouble is, on sunny days the trails are clogged with a parade of runners, skateboarders, cyclists, baby strollers and folks out for a leisurely walk. I’ve probably nearly hit them all, yelling, “On your left, coming on your left.” Sometimes you’re forced on the grass; other times you just have to stop.

Why take these risks? Well, the empty streets beckon. It’s fun breezing through intersections normally gridlocked. And I’m mindful of the risks. My head is always on a swivel. You concentrate, you don’t just cruise. I’m always looking right, left, over my shoulder, who’s coming up. Looking ahead a few blocks for construction cones, police cars blocking off an emergency, double-parked vehicle. I’m listening for cars and trucks coming up behind me, darting out of parking lots or pulling out of a parking space.

Lots of people like to cycle or run or walk with headphones or ear buds, listening to music. Not me. I prefer situational awareness.

Have I learned from my close calls? Yes and no. I stop for traffic more instead of trying to zoom in and out. I stop for slow movers on the trails rather than trying to brush past them. I concentrate more; ride on auto-pilot less. But the sheer number of hazards and exposure to potential accidents means I’m always riding into something unpredictable; an obstacle or barrier or situation I haven’t come across before.

You’ve got to be aware, alert, mindful, head on a swivel. But there’s always an element of randomness and unpredictability. Biking in a city will always be risky. More than one person has warned me. For me it’s an elective; a form of exercise. It’s not a job; no one is forcing me on the streets. It’s a matter of risk tolerance. I’ll take the risks while the city “sleeps” during the pandemic lockdown. When life returns to “normal” and the traffic is ten times what it is now, I’ll be a lot less adventurous.