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I'M GOING THROUGH a phase right now that I don't see ending anytime soon. Not just the long hair and beard, because I go through this phase annually. My new phase has its roots in the machines of my youth, which I thought I outgrew around the same time I stopped hanging pictures of Guns N' Roses and Poison on my bedroom walls. And yet, here I am.

It's a good phase, though. An important phase — an important phase, as phases go — because it's one that is the product of an observational as well as an active life. And it's a good phase because it's indicative of America and the American spirit. What's more, I get giddy just thinking about my new phase, like a young boy who just got a brand-new Hot Wheels. It's funny how the older you get, the younger you want to feel.

When I was a kid, I loved American muscle cars. I had pictures of Corvettes and Mustangs and Firebirds hanging right alongside my pictures of Axl Rose and Bret Michaels. My two favorite muscle cars were the 1967 Oldsmobile Toronado, with its 425 CID Super Rocket V8 engine, and, of course, the 1969 Dodge Charger R/T 440 CID V8, known throughout the 1980s as the General Lee. Yeah, I also had a poster of Bo and Luke Duke hanging up for the longest time. And another one of Daisy.

Pictures and posters of bands and cars came

and went until I left for college. After graduation, they ceased altogether. These days, my daughters' walls are adorned with posters of the Fresh Beat Band and of Care Bears. Up until a week ago, I drove a very Fresh Beat- and Care Bear-friendly car: a Subaru Forester. On a whim, I sold it, thereby abruptly bringing my granola phase to an end.

That's just how it's been with me and cars over the years. I've always gone through phases. In high school, it was an anything-I-can-get-my-hands-on phase, which was a turquoise 1989 Honda Civic. In college, it was a wannabe-preppy phase, which was a 1993 Acura Integra. After college, it was an I-wish-I-was-still-in-college phase, and I drove a 1997 Jeep Wrangler. And then it was the Subaru's turn for my married-with-children-and-Care-Bears-posters phase.

Then I woke up one day and my elbows hurt from the previous day's workout. I fought through the pain the following day, assuming that it was just the weather or that I'd slept on them wrong or something. Turns out that I basically destroyed both elbows by lifting weights the wrong way for too long. The orthopedic surgeon informed me that I'd need surgery — on both elbows — because at my age, these tears and fractures will only get worse. So I found a new orthopedic surgeon. He told me the same thing.

Right around the time I was contemplating how I'd be able to type with one hand while the other arm was in a full cast, and then how I'd do it with the other when the other was in a full cast, I got a call from my buddy Chad Robertson in Detroit. We've known each other since college, and we've shared many conversations over many root beers about all kinds of stuff, but mostly about cars. Chad's a bona fide car guy; not a hobbyist like me. He's worked for Chrysler for 13 years, and he knows his product forward and backward. It's because of Chad that my wife bought her first car, a Jeep Liberty, in 2001. She still drives it.

Even though I hadn't spoken with Chad in way too long, he could sense something was wrong.

"You sound bummed out," he said.

"I think I'm having a midlife crisis," I replied. "I woke up this morning with elbows that don't work, a car I don't want, an upcoming birthday I don't want to celebrate, and Care Bear posters I don't understand."

"Well, that's about the strangest rant I've ever heard," he said, quite matter-of-factly. "Sorry, but I can't help you with any of that. Except the car. You need an American muscle car if for no other reason than to be a surrogate for your own aging, deteriorating muscles."

That was the sort of call to action I needed. Chad was right. I may be getting older and my muscles less muscular, but American cars are getting stronger. And that, dear readers, is why this is a good phase. An important phase. Like the Chrysler corporation itself — like America itself — I might ebb and flow physically and mentally as the years tick by. But just like the company that manufactured my new 2013 Dodge Charger in the best country in the world, don't count me out just yet. I'll get my elbows fixed. I'll hang another Care Bear poster. And then I'll come back better than ever. The auto industry; the airline industry; the human body; America — all are fluent in two languages: strength and growth. We're all going to continue to grow strong.

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