

## **Lessons from the Road**

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Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington-Normal, IL

February 2, 2014

I had my first driving lesson the summer I was 13. My best friend's father bought a motorcycle, and since I was more or less just another one of his kids, he taught me how to ride along with the others. One lesson he offered, the one I will never forget, is this: no sudden moves. When starting up, when changing directions, when coming to a stop—do none of those things precipitously. “Never do anything suddenly, and you won't get into trouble,” he said.

The reason I remember this advice so vividly is quite possibly because I was there to witness the instance when he demonstrated the foolhardiness of not heeding his own advice. Our first riding ground, as we were learning the ins and outs of motorcycling, was on the trails that led from my friend's back yard and through the woods. On day one of our motorcycling lessons, as Debbie's father demonstrated safe operation, he headed off into the woods promptly tangling his foot in a vine. That was his first stroke of bad luck. The kicker was doing it in full view of his children and would-be pupils. And the final blow fell in his immediate and ill-considered reaction to all of the above. It did, however, hammer home the lesson: no sudden moves.

Though I soon got my own motorcycle and Debbie and I had many a two-wheeled adventure, it was another three or four years before anyone let me behind the wheel of a car. By then the lesson was well ingrained. Do not take precipitous action. It struck me as I began to drive a car that the wisdom my friend's father imparted for motorcycles held true for any mechanized transport. I had learned that same lesson years before regarding non-mechanized transport, aka horses, riding the same trails we learned to handle a motorcycle on, but now it all started to come together. “No sudden moves” was pretty good advice for many situations, from testing whether or not your friend really knows how to make a bungee cord from rubber bands to making a career choice.

So today, I would like to share with you some of the other lessons I have learned about driving, lessons that have translated well for me to the larger more overarching journey of life. The first one is Debbie's father's lesson – no sudden moves.

He was not talking about removing all spontaneity from life. There is joy and adventure and growth in spontaneity. But spontaneous is not precipitous. If there is joy and adventure and growth in spontaneous there is regret and humiliation and broken bones in precipitous. Deciding on the spur of the moment to sign up for kayaking lessons is spontaneous. White water kayaking in Canada in February when you have never before been in a kayak and don't know how to roll it is precipitous. And if you think I am being hyperbolic to make a point you don't know some of the people I'm related to.

In our spiritual lives some spontaneity is called for. Seeking, questioning, doubting, testing new ideas—all of these are good and healthy. But there is such a thing as precipitous when you burn

bridges, when belief turns to fundamentalism, when any aspect leads to violence. Then religion becomes damaging to your soul rather than life affirming. No sudden moves.

The next important driving lesson came in high school during Drivers Ed. Somehow the instructor twigged to the fact that I could not back up to save my life. There was something so counterintuitive to me about looking over my shoulder and turning the wheel in the wholly wrong direction that I still fail to really get it. So the instructor made me back around my entire high school on those narrow asphalt paths that run between buildings and sports fields, navigating gates in chain link fences and dodging dumpsters. It was a harrowing enough experience that I recall it distinctly 40 years later. But it taught me this – being comfortable with backing up is of great value.

Sometimes you just really need to admit that where you're heading is not where you want to go. If, at those times, you can find the courage or even the comfort to back up far enough to gain perspective on all the routes available you have created the possibility to go forward on a better course. You can at least explore other options if you can see them.

This doesn't mean erasing where you've been. Backing up doesn't come with a memory wipe. You retain what you learned on that road, all the sites and attractions remain with you, all the people you encountered along the way are still in your address book, but if you can admit that that road isn't the one that heads where you want to go now, if you can back up and look at what other roads are open to you, you have a much better chance of reaching a destination that offers greater fulfillment or salvation.

So to review, don't do anything precipitous and learn how to back up. Lesson number three also comes from high school Drivers Ed, but not from my personal experience. It comes from Concord Carlisle High School where my colleague Kim Crawford Harvie learned to drive. Her driving instructor, Mr. Bulger, taught his students how to turn or change lanes with the acronym SMOG. Signal that you want to change lanes, check your Mirrors, look Over your shoulder and Go. Most people start by looking for an opening, but Mr. Bulger held that you should start the process by first signaling your intention. If you do, many people will let you in. You can then check your mirrors, look over your shoulder and go.

By first signaling your desire to change directions you work to create the opening, the opportunity, to fulfill your hopes. At the least, your own attention will turn toward possible openings, but you also offer an entire universe the chance to cooperate with your deepest dreams.

So to review, no sudden moves. Learn how to back up. SMOG.

My fourth insight to driving for life comes from survival driving in Boston, and it is this – practice compassion. This lesson came about specifically while I was attending seminary and commuting into the city from our suburban home to attend classes. It did not arise from any enlightenment of spiritual journey or some idealistic view of what it meant to be a religious professional in training, but from irritation and boredom. The irritation came from the fact that in Boston you simply cannot expect anyone to make an opening just because you signaled your desire to turn. The boredom arose from driving the same uninspiring route day after day. The

route was carefully planned not to require any left turns so that I did not have to rely on the kindness of strangers to get me to class on time, but the route also provided many chances to observe others fruitlessly trying to make left turns. And so to amuse myself I invented a game where I had to find at least one person attempting to turn across traffic and let them in. If I made it all the way to Newton and the commute was nearing an end, letting someone merge in would suffice but involving two lanes of opposing traffic was the gold standard for a successful day at Seminary Commute, the Bored Game.

Although the game arose from less than altruistic motives, the reactions of other drivers who unexpectedly got to make their turns and continue *their* journeys, taught me a great lesson about kindness in a sort of “what goes around, comes around” way. Sometimes my miniscule act of driving compassion would ripple and I would see someone I let in let the next person in. But the real “coming back around” was how I felt when I was able to help someone else go on their way. As the poet Gwendolyn Brooks wrote:

*we are each other's harvest:  
we are each other's business:  
we are each other's magnitude and bond.*

Compassion lived in acts as minute as traffic politeness enrich our world, serve to heal even one small corner of our world.

No sudden moves. Learn how to back up. SMOG. Practice compassion.

My final driving lesson comes from the year following seminary when I was in active ministry. It is this: accidents happen. Nobody wants accidents to happen, nor do we enjoy them when they do, but as no life is without them, we might as well use them for what meaning they can impart, what lessons they can teach.

As our reading this morning points out, accidents can be valuable teachers. While they may not be our fault, still they may have wisdom to impart and we may want to take another street the next time. And when the accidents that occur are our fault they offer another opportunity—the opportunity to utter what Kim Crawford Harvie calls “the nine magical words that could change the world.” I’m sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me. These words are worth memorizing. They do not erase. They do not restore. But they do heal. I’m sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me. With these words we communicate our recognition of what we have done, of having damaged the interconnected web of all existence. More, we signal our feelings, our regret over having done this. I’m sorry. We create connection and provide an opening for the other person to enter into that connection. Please forgive me. These *are* words that carry the possibility of changing the world.

One other possibility that accidents offer us is this lesson—pay attention. Most accidents happen when we are distracted, distracted by the unexpected actions of another driver, distracted by the cell phone ringing, by the kids fighting in the back seat, by the fight we ourselves had recently without someone close to us. Pay attention. It is the best lesson anyone can offer us for driving. It is arguably the best lesson we can learn, period.

One summer John and I were driving to New Hampshire when we saw far up ahead cars pulled to the side of the road. We could see no obvious reason for this, but as we were approaching a long rise it seemed that whatever had stopped traffic was on the other side of the hill. Road construction, a major accident, a crossing family of ducks? As we reached that point just behind the last car pulled off into the grass, that point where we could see over the crest of the hill, there in distance was the single most spectacular rainbow I have ever seen. All these cars had pulled off the road because our way was blocked by beauty. In the face of this magnificent creation the only response was to stop and drink it in—to pay attention.

All the other lessons connect here in these two words – pay attention. You have just this one life lived in just this way. If our purpose here in this life is to learn what it has to teach—pay attention. If our purpose here is to healing a suffering creation—pay attention. If our purpose here is to navigate as well as we might, to find whatever fulfillment or salvation is possible—pay attention. When you hear the violin in the subway—pay attention. And may you be blessed with great music.

No sudden moves. Learn how to back up. SMOG. Practice compassion. Accidents happen. I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me. Pay attention.

May your journeys be gentle but not straight, surprising and joyful but with tests enough bring home the lessons. For there are many more lessons than these few, lessons for the journey. How to parallel park, to always bring snacks and games, to keep a spare and a signal flare in the trunk, that sharing the driving and singing along makes the trip more fun. May your journey bring you many lessons, and may you know joy.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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