

champs

Center for Healthy Aging Ministries, Programs & Services

From the Parish Nurse

View from the Backseat

(First of a three part series)

As a senior citizen was driving down the freeway, his cell phone rang. Answering, he heard his wife's voice urgently warning him, "Herman, I just heard on the news that there's a car going the wrong way on Interstate 77. Please be careful!"
"Heck," said Herman, "It's not just one car. It's hundreds of them!"

Do you remember when you were learning to drive? Perhaps you learned with your mother or father out on a country road, or in a parking lot. If you grew up in a rural area your first venture may have been on the family tractor. Once you learned to operate the clutch (remember those) you could sit on the tractor and drive it slowly while others threw bails of hay on the flatbed, or corn was dumped into a cart. After the thrill of driving the tractor wore off you wanted to drive the family vehicle whenever anyone went to town, even if Mom or Dad had to be along. Of course, human nature being what it is this too lost its newness.

Borrowing the family vehicle came with a lot of rules and regulations which were unnecessary to the teenage mind, but imperative to the adults in charge. At that age we couldn't understand all the fuss over safety, dangers of driving too fast on the gravel roads and later on the "super highways". The need to drive slowly, keep a safe distance between cars, stay alert and watch for turning traffic, and apply brakes slowly were all basic rules. We were invincible! Accidents happened to someone else and certainly not to us—we were "better drivers" than that.

How naïve we were and the reality of all this sometimes thankfully never touched us personally, but if you read the newspaper or listened to the "town talk" you soon learned that someone you knew had "crashed" and had serious or fatal injuries. Then, like now, we seldom learn from others telling us but rather wait for the lesson to become personal—the injuries occurring to us, or the death of a loved one or friend.

During our adult years we have learned to take driving for granted. We'll always do it. That's kind of like our view of life—it goes on and on. But is this true? Age starts to alter our reaction time and one finds the front end of their vehicle about two feet further into the intersection than they had supposed. How could this be? The fact is our reaction time slows down and our muscle strength and flexibility are not what they used to be. We are easily distracted by the radio, conversations with others and just all the confusion of the traffic.

Furthermore, our vision declines! This is truly the pits—glaucoma, cataracts and/or macular degeneration are all common diagnosis. Now it is hard to see at night, there are "halos" around lights,

especially streetlights, the glare of headlights from oncoming cars is blinding and most of the time you feel like the windshield is "dirty" even though you just cleaned it. So we make adjustments. We remember when borrowing the family car came with a list of rules and adjustments. Now we find ourselves making our own lists of rules so we can hang onto our license and our independence for awhile longer. We only drive in the daylight, on roads we are familiar with to common destinations. Sometimes we even resort to taking a co-pilot along to "watch for things".

These adjustments are good ways to cope, but the big question is when we honestly reflect on the fact that accidents do not always happen to someone else, but can come to our doorstep. Not only can we be injured but we can injure others.

Finally, this story reminds us that we have to laugh at how funny we can be:

An elderly Floridian called 911 on her cell phone to report that her car has been broken into. She is hysterical as she explains her situation to the dispatcher: "They've stolen the stereo, the steering wheel, the brake pedal and even the accelerator!" she cried. The dispatcher said, "Stay calm. An officer is on the way." A few minutes later, the officer radios in. "Disregard." He says. "She got in the back-seat by mistake."

Adapting to life's inevitable changes isn't easy, but accepting the responsibility to examine your driving skills honestly is a necessary part of life and aging. Think about enrolling in the AARP (Association of Retired Persons) sponsored program, the 55-Alive Mature Driver Program which helps elders learn how to compensate for declining vision and reaction time. The Association for Driver Rehabilitation offers referrals to specialists who teach persons with disabilities adaptive techniques.

Is it time for you to honestly evaluate your driving skills? Pray about it and look for alternatives to get to your destination rather than driving yourself. Call another church friend and ride with them – let others know this is a problem you need help with. Or, keep your car and have another responsible person drive you. (Check your insurance coverage, as well.)

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