

Traffic

November & December 2023

Months ago, I was driving north on the interstate, returning home from a pleasant visit with a friend of many years who now lives in Denver. Our time had been relaxing, dining outside on the restaurant's patio on an unusually warm morning in early spring. It was a Saturday, and I had anticipated some traffic congestion. As I attempted to stake out territory in the middle lane, congestion gave way to coagulation. Cars zipped at high speed from lane to lane, oblivious to the signs that asked us to slow down for the safety of the highway construction workers. Long vehicles seemed to magically squeeze into spaces for economy-short cars. We who lacked daring found ourselves dancing to the drumbeat of faster and faster, wilder and wilder.

Because of mergers and the occasional plodding old car of the sixties, I foolishly entered forbidden territory, the far passing lane. My attention immediately turned to calculations that might allow me to return to the safer middle lane, the lane always suggested by those "Safety First" magazine articles. It was not long before I realized I was stuck in the faster than fast lane, never to escape, or if I did escape, to have missed my exit for home by several hours. No sooner did I settle into my fate than the enormous red truck behind me started revving toward my rear bumper and then retreating, a malicious pattern. It was, to be blunt, disconcerting. I took deep breaths, breathing out, in my fear, "C-L-A-M." Then the truck's horn blasted, rhythmically, maddeningly, like "the tintinabulation of the bells, bells, bells" (See E. A. Poe, "The Bells", if you dare). I could not accelerate. I dared not go slower. The traffic was bumper to bumper, my speed dependent on the line of cars before me and the deranged fool behind me. No escape.

Road rage should be met with calm. Whatever calm I had felt turned to fear. If I stayed in front of the horror movie truck, I would be ground up, squished, obliterated. I said a prayer for even a narrow opening in the middle lane. When one appeared, I shot to the right, just as a car two lanes over, shot to the left.

Had it occurred, the pileup would have been immense and deadly. It did not. I know that God intervened and shoved my car back into the space in front of the red truck. I heard no more horn. I was resigned to hold to a steady speed until I crossed into Wyoming, where the traffic, if I were truly blessed, would thin out. A near cataclysm, because of the rage of one big truck.

Does anyone really need to get "there" so quickly? Is road rage really necessary? Or dangerous dashes from one lane to another? Or speed in excess of any reasonable limit? Must we compete, play daredevil, or just be downright rude? Do we always have to be first? In *Travels with Charley*, John Steinbeck, marveling at the first interstate roads (what we might now call primitive) thought that—if I remember my facts accurately—fifty miles per hour prevented the driver from seeing the beautiful landscapes of our country. Landscapes? Are you kidding? Destination is dominant, and fifty mph is for the parking lots! Let's all ignore the courteous dignity of the four-way stop!

But, everyone, let's slow down our thinking for just a minute or two. This nasty, reckless speed fetish—faster for the sake of going faster—seems to be dominant particularly in human beings,

for the very reason that we want to be dominant over others. Does this haste for the waste of others occur in any other beings on our planet?

Since I became a young adult, I determined that animals, considered “dumb” in texts of old, are actually much smarter than humans. Whereas homo sapiens embrace rapidity, stress, and the art of multitasking and running in circles, fauna flourish, for the most part, on a slow and rhythmical tempo, one of calm, ease, and singleness of purpose. We, at the finish line, should be giving them the gold medal.

How I delight in chancing upon animals and insects going about their daily and deliberate peregrination, one of purpose and benign responsibility, halted only by curiosity or that “uh oh” feeling. Several weeks ago, I joined my husband in gathering firewood in the mountains. As he sawed, I scurried about to gather the chunks and stack them into the bed of our truck. We tromped and shouted, and the saw whirred its loudest. Indeed, we were invaders to the quiet forest. In contrition, I took time to thank the earth and its giving trees, and we were careful to cut only deadfall and to avoid stepping on the legion of baby pines. After a break, John moved farther into the woods. I stopped by a tall, healthy tree to tighten my shoes. At the tree’s base, was a narrow, long branch on which moseyed a fat ladybug. I crouched and watched her determination. Then I sensed that she could be in danger of one of four hiking boots. I fussed and frittered, my thoughts going in circles. I took a deep breath, and ignoring the cut wood piling up, I slowly raised the branch, balanced it slowly, and began my slow, deliberate, and long peregrination to a grassy, woodsy place beyond a little pond I had earlier spied. I giggled as I walked this survival walk. For the first time in my life, I was in sync with a ladybug. Gosh, it felt awfully nice.

Earlier in the summer, we hauled our little camper up to the North Fork campground for a quiet weekend of hiking and reading. In the chilly mist of the dawn of the second morning, nature called, and I layered up in warm clothes, picked my way over our two snoozing Labradors, and trotted up the sandy trail to the ladies’ room. I slowed my return walk, breathing in the crisp air and savoring the majesty of a mountain morning. The big mama moose and her yearling (Didn’t I see them last year, right by our camper?) were nearly upon me before I saw them. Their obvious intent was to cross my path on their way to the creek. They stopped. I stopped. Aggression was not a part of the scene. Mama stared at me. I looked down, slowly shuffled my feet in a “gosh, gee, your baby is pretty” manner. Then, I raised my head and whispered, “Go ahead, this is your forest.” Only then did they resume their long-legged plod. I stared at the majestic, courteous animals until they disappeared down the bank of the creek. I had witnessed and participated in something beautiful. As I deliberately, slowly made my way to the camper, I recalled the wisdom of the children’s book, *Make Way For Ducklings*.