

Careful; I'm now actually going to use a reference which you can verify yourselves. I even advise it! In the Oct. 11, 1999 issue of TIME, pp78-79, Robert Hughes writes in the DISPATCH section of a horrific accident he survived in Australia. But what I found most enlightening and disturbing was his second paragraph therein, which contained only the statement "And that's all I remember".

It is placed between descriptors of his day spent fishing before driving about two miles at twilight where he impacted another car with three people. Injuries were horrible, but all appear to have survived. He proceeds to provide excruciating detail of the people he was with earlier, plans for the evening, the fish he left in the trunk, and the people who helped him to stay alive at the scene.

Missing, somehow, is any indication of his culpability for the results, except to acknowledge the police report which says he drifted across the lane, though he goes to some length to dispell this by suggesting his lights were on (as though they represented some repulsive force), and a "post-traumatic amnesia", with the associated description of "... whiTing out of violent episodes". I don't buy it, and I'd offer to change that T to an N.

Before I rant further, please consider what would happen if fighter pilots "blacked out" every time someone shot at them. There is WAY too much evidence of planes being landed safely after extensive damage to plane and pilot to accept that premise without question. It is precisely what transpired before that accident which I find objectionable on the face of this article; he has NO idea what he did for the two miles he drove preceeding this contact point, despite exquisite detail on the rest of the minutae.

So first, my verifiable premise; Excepting a failure of the machine itself, no accident can occur without at least one mistake. And involvement with a second vehicle requires at least TWO errors. Think about it and it becomes obvious. The error may not immediately be so, but it will eventually be determinable.

So consider the circumstances of his plight. He suggests he turned left from the beach onto the twilit Great Northern Highway. Although he does not say, I expect that put the sun at his back, but perhaps not. In any case, if it did, then the oncoming car with the three passengers might have been blinded by the backlighting. But I tend to doubt that, as no such interpretation was suggested. He also included photos of both the car, and the twilit section of road. There is the evidence. The only thing separating oncoming vehicles from one another is an interrupted stripe of paint on the pavement. Otherwise, that pavement is desolate.

I propose his "amnesia" had nothing to do with trauma, and everything to do with pleasure and ignorance. At dusk after a long day on the beach fishing, he gets into a car and might as well be taking a pistol into a darkened room and pulling the trigger. He fell asleep at the wheel within those empty two miles from boredom. I've had it happen to me, before I went on a CPAP machine to address my sleep apnea. I'll bet he would be a prime candidate. And whatever his state of alertness, he was completely incapable of making the right decision if his subconscious told him something was wrong, because his instinctive response to recognizing an oncoming vehicle would be to swerve back into his lane. But he was in AUSTRALIA, and that lane was THEIRS! And they were merely unlucky to be there when he decided to turn. But he failed to be in control of himself, first, and his vehicle, second, just as per my premise above. Had he not made BOTH those mistakes, we would not be reading about his experiences at all. Just think about it.

My intent in this is not to add pain to his suffering. I consider myself very lucky indeed to have avoided accidents during my early apnea days before treatment. Fifty percent of those diagnosed as having apnea which goes untreated are DEAD within ten years, and accidents are the number one cause. But I also know that, whatever control of your facilities you possess, when you resort to instinctive response, your instincts better be the correct ones. And I am very sad to say that our system of highway law enforcement and Joan Claybrook produced an entire population with no clue whatsoever, which has killed an awful lot of them.

Here in the USA, we have paid for highway design and construction for the interstates based on 80 mph “design” speed, ie. neutral handling through curves at 80, and sight distances appropriate for the response times and braking capacity of vehicles from the ‘50’s. Small wonder they are so safe. But the period of the “Double Nickle” forced us to learn to be incompetent, as the enforced speed was below the natural speed for the road. Each incremental variance from that “normalcy” causes greater deviation from the expected responses, even when attempting to focus on the job at hand. Our brains are taking in data and processing it, and if their capacity is that of a Pentium, when we use only enough to fill an 8086, we will find other activities to do concurrently. Like check e-mails, cell calls, read TIME, drink a latte or whatever. Or our brains will tell us that we should be sleeping. Which has replaced alcohol as the number one killer on our highways.

What brought this into focus was a recent bout with personal worries, which have been disturbing my sleep. I have offset that with added sleep hours through the day to assure I will not have his problems. But that started me thinking about how worrying could be a GOOD thing when driving, if it actually keeps you more alert. And may explain why there seems to be no real correlation between speed, per se, and accident rates. In fact, 20% faster than average traffic flow would appear to be the lowest fatality rate of all, only climbing as closing speeds get ridiculously large. It also strikes me as reasonable that one reason to “worry”, besides the long arm of the law with their ever more devious trapping equipment but little cause/effect evidence that tickets have created positive change, is that Einstein was right; time compresses with speed. You must do more in less time as you increment up velocity on the road. And the only way to be prepared for that is to have done it so frequently that it becomes instinct. In Mr. Hughes’ case, he should have slept well before driving, and should have been MORE conscious of the differences between US and Aussie (Brits & progeny and Japan) traffic patterns. In my case, I drive identically on the track and street, which means within MY ability to control the situation at ALL times, having trained myself to look well down the road and anticipate potential problems, and establish contingency plans for each beforehand. It isn’t hard, but it does require a change in how you perceive yourself relative to your environment.

He obviously saw himself as victim. I don’t.