

The Alternative Line

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Remedial Reading Should Be Required To Get A License

There has been much written about the state of our educational system; we spend more than anyone else per capita, yet our children on average know less and less vs their counterparts in much of the world. Colleges are having to teach remedial English and math just to get entering students up to their minimum standards for fundamentals. Why? Meanwhile, we have pitched battle debates about whose fault it is, and we use children as negotiating tools and test subjects as we try ever more expensive and non-beneficial “models” of what education should be, with little change in outcomes. Or cost acceleration. Again, why?

There are exceptions. It has been a fact for all the time I have been aware that verbal skills at predominantly tech schools like MIT, Clarkson and RPI have left much to be desired. So we have engineers who cannot complete coherent sentences but who can design brilliant mechanisms. The reverse is often true at places like Julliard and Bard where the spoken word is a critical part of their skillset, so it is a reasonable expectation they would be accomplished linguists, while the term “differential equation” would be met with “deer in the headlights”. So it has never been essential that everybody be an expert in ALL of the three “R’s” on graduating high school.

But problems occur where we interact, as on the highways. One need not have Einstein’s IQ to get a license. I would argue that they are handed out like green stamps, (how many of you dear readers recognize that reference ? ;-) then the government uses them as a means to collect revenues, and adds ever more ways to take them away which have nothing to do with what they are intended to signify – competence behind the wheel of a lethal weapon. Even to the point of having police write bogus tickets, for which they are never expected to provide the slightest shred of evidence in courts where they are sleeping partners, all in the name of revenue generation, but with the added insult of moralizing with a “Driver Responsibility Fee” if you happen to be unwilling to accept the plea bargain offered by the DA, also a sleeping partner in the charade, which will reduce the “points” but not the fine because they know the system is rigged as well. But the system is heavily biased toward enforcement of arbitrary speed constraints and the “nanny state” enforcement of the cause du jour, like seatbelt use and handheld phones and texting while driving, rather than real safety.

Make no mistake; distractive activities while driving are evidence that you didn’t pay attention during the Darwin lectures in middle school, presuming you attended a school outside Kansas and Texas. There they think “god” simply wanted you to be killed if you do stupid things. Whatever. My issue is that the “what” that we have been pouring into our childrens’ skulls has missed the mark by the widest of margins. We teach them things to remember, then test that memory both to determine future channeling of the student and to determine the funding which will flow from the nanny state to their school, even while they can instantly retrieve almost anything they need to memorize from their handheld personal communicator.

What we miss, based on all the evidence around us, is the teaching of “principles” which will be needed to succeed in whatever world we “adults” leave to them. Yet there is some evidence that our kids may be learning to get along with each other far better than the prior generations did, except at a violent underclass level. Witness the civil rights for former slave populations, and the increased tolerance for alternative lifestyles and viewpoints. Like mine ;-) Yet there also seems to be even more polarity in those views – perhaps because we have failed to teach that there is a value in a reasoned discourse between people who have differing opinions but must somehow find a way to get on with it in some way which allows for peaceful coexistence despite those differences. I believe that is one major failure of our “teaching” of our children.

How does this relate to cars, you ask. Simple. If we have the Glenn Beck mentality behind the wheel, then we drive as if the road were ours alone. Never mind all those other cars we find there. We have learned that we must watch our speedometers instead of the road, because that is what carries the potential risks, at least as we perceive them. But that, too, is a failure to educate, as our ability to determine real risk is based on our understanding of those principles we call risk. When we have institutions which were supposed to be rock-solid but prove to be manipulative, self-centered, and undependable, small wonder we cannot distinguish what risk really is.

Integrity is something which must be taught, and must be learned, if we are to hope for our survival as a society. But how does one teach such a nebulous skill? It starts with parenting. “Do as I say, not as I do” is the antithesis of the need. Consistency, more than absolute correctness, is key, but being rational is important. That is how we teach “principles”. One hopes you dear readers know the difference from “principals”. That is called distinction, which is how we sort out nuance, since few things in life are so diametrically opposed as to be obvious. And explaining nuance to a child is fundamental to teaching principles.

Now that I have demonstrated to you that, despite being an engineer, I also learned a little English along the way, let us get to applying the diatribe above to driving. Otherwise, what is the purpose of this?

Driving properly involves a host of negotiated activities; decisions to do one thing instead of another. You cannot exclusively look only forward or you will eventually be hit from the side. Instruments are there to inform you of the condition of your vehicle, in the hope of maintaining your ability to use it for a longer period of time. But they have to be looked at and understood, even while driving. So you have to pay attention to everything. And where in that do you have available time to spend texting or talking on a cellphone, without reducing your available time to spend looking at all the other things you must negotiate?

Most of us know a little about traffic laws. Few of us, though, seem to demonstrate it, at least if taken by the behaviors observed by drivers we share the road with. It is obvious that most of us can read a speed limit sign and a speedometer, as evidenced by our adhesion to that highly enforced limit, even if we have learned that stretching it by 10 mph is generally accepted procedure. I used to think most understood “Keep Right Except To Pass” was automatically in force, like 55 mph, when not explicitly posted. Yet there rears its ugly head the “me first” approach, and it is far too widespread to be a mere insignificant minority. How frequently do you come upon some dolt in the left lane at 10 under the traffic speed, forcing everyone around to pass on the right. Most, but not all, will eventually move right after a few cars have had to awaken them, so it’s not like they don’t know the rule.

But there is where nuance comes in again. Because some people will be turning left at some time during this journey, they want to be sure they can be in the proper lane to make the turn. But that is the point. Is it the next intersection, and is that intersection within the next 10th of a mile? If not, then why are they there already? Last I knew, in the context of “Keep Right Except To Pass”, the word “Pass” is an active verb, meaning “git-er-dun”. And then get back right because you ain’t any longer “passing” once you have “passed”. Where I live in Liverpool, Morgan Rd runs north from the village. Four lanes with a painted median, and about eight intersections over the approx mile it covers. Invariably, slow cars immediately move left as they head north from the village, despite a golf course preventing any turns for a third of a mile. Even then, most who move left will not actually turn until they get to Buckley Rd, almost ¾ mile ahead. Perhaps even worse is Forestbrook, a left only which is another 10th from that, allowing people to build up a head of steam so they crash into those stopping in the left lane because they really are turning there. Happens all too frequently.

I am certain you dear readers can come up with a host of similar “why the heck do they do that?” questions regarding rules of the road which were supposedly part of the process for getting a license for their lethal weapon. Mostly I am convinced it stems from our societal inability to start with courteous. But I happen to play a musical instrument, and wonder how long one who does should be expected to listen to someone who does so badly. It’s the same for driving, which neither excuses nor justifies my swearing as I go around such behaviors, but which makes ME a “bad driver” in the eyes of the law. At least that explains it. Inattention is dangerous, and exacerbated by ignorance. The term “suffers incompetence poorly” applies to me. Call me crazy.

All those rules are in the drivers’ manual for passing the test to get a license, so they ought to know them. Must be they can’t read, based on the evidence, so maybe we need remedial reading as part of the course.

