

The Golden Rule of Driving

When I was learning to drive I struggled to make sense out of the myriad “rules of the road” my Driver’s Ed teacher kept spewing at me. “Never enter an intersection unless you can clear it” he instructed as traffic backed up behind a railroad crossing. “You don’t want to block the cross traffic when the light changes.” I duly memorized that rule and put it into effect the next time I was waiting for traffic to clear so I could turn left.

“Pull up to the center of the intersection” he commanded. (Actually he said “pull up to the manhole cover,” but since he gave this same direction at intersections that didn’t have manhole covers I guessed he meant the center of the intersection.) “Turn on your turn signal but don’t cut your wheels until the traffic clears and you’re ready to move.”

I began to protest “I thought you said never enter an intersection. . .”

“You’ll be able to clear the intersection when the light turns yellow and the oncoming traffic stops” he explained. (He was always optimistic about other drivers stopping for yellow lights, signaling lane changes, and otherwise following the rules he taught us.) “If you stop here you’ll block the cars behind you that want to go straight. Pull up so they can get by. Don’t cut your wheels yet, because if one of them smacks into your rear bumper you don’t want them to push you into the oncoming traffic.”

OK. So sometimes you don’t enter an intersection when you can’t clear it but sometimes you do. Then one day when we were driving through the downtown area I pulled into the right hand lane, only to be told to move back to the left lane.

“I thought I was supposed to keep right except to pass!” I protested.

“That’s true except where people are parallel parking” he answered. “If you drive in the right lane here you’ll interfere with people trying to get in or out of a parking spot.”

Soooo, don’t enter an intersection except for the times when you do. Keep right except for the times when you need to keep left. . . The rules for safe driving were beginning to look like a Byzantine labyrinth of mysterious rituals and contradictions. I thought I’d never master all the rules of the road, when suddenly I had a Vision. OK. It wasn’t exactly a vision because I didn’t

see anything. I just heard it. But people look at you funny and back away slowly if you tell them you heard voices in your head. Let's just say I had an "audio revelation." The words I heard were in the voice of our local parish priest, and of course he was using the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. (Episcopalians of my generation believe Moses came down from the mountain with the 10 Commandments under one arm and the 1928 prayer book under the other.) The words I heard were as follows:

"Thou Shalt Not Endanger Thy Neighbor.

This is the first and greatest commandment, and the second is like unto it:

Thou Shalt Not Impede Thy Neighbor's Progress.

On these two commandments hang all the laws, and the statutes."

Suddenly, everything made sense! I shouldn't enter an intersection I couldn't clear because to do so would impede other drivers! The exception was when I was impeding drivers by not entering the intersection and I knew I could clear the intersection as soon as the light changed. I shouldn't cut my wheels until it was safe to turn, though, because to do so would endanger my neighbor! (Not to mention the danger it would pose to *me*.) I began to drive confidently, signaling my turns, changing lanes as appropriate, and otherwise adhering to these two simple rules. As the years went by I found these two commandments applied to virtually every situation I ever encountered. (OK. There was an incident on Guam when I decided to endanger my neighbor by passing a pickup truck in a marginal passing zone. The truck was loaded with pig manure and I decided a risky pass was better than keeping my convertible within the noxious plume that trailed behind it.)

Sadly, over these same years I have also learned that not every driver on the road shares my vision. It's also obvious that many other drivers did not have a Driver's Ed teacher of the same caliber as mine, or if they did they didn't pay attention. Turn signals are used haphazardly, if at all. Even people who do use them don't seem to realize that they are supposed to give other drivers a "heads up" as to what you *intend* to do. Their purpose is not to provide an answer to the question "WHY THE HELL ARE YOU BRAKING?" As someone who often drives older cars I know it's annoying to stick your arm out to signal a turn when it's cold and rainy, but I do

it anyway. New cars have electric gadgets that signal your turns without you even having to roll down the window. Why can't the guy in that BMW flip that little lever to use his gadget?

Similarly, the concept of turning into the near lane doesn't seem to have made a lasting impression on most drivers. When my Driver's Ed instructor explained it, it sounded simple. If you're making a left turn onto a street with more than one lane, turn into the left lane. If you're making a right turn, turn into the right lane. As he pointed out, if there was oncoming traffic turning onto the same street, you could both turn at the same time. "He can turn into his lane and you can turn into yours" he would recite. The world was indeed a neat and orderly place, until the first time I had to slam on my brakes because "he" turned into "my" lane. As the years went by I discovered that people turning into the wrong lane were the exception rather than the rule. I realize that big rigs ("semi's" on this side of the pond or "articulated lorries" in England) have to make wide turns, but why can't the lady in the Toyota Corolla stay in her own lane when she makes a turn? Why does she have to swing wide into my lane and cut me off?

A complete listing of boneheaded moves that violate the rules my Driver's Ed instructor taught me would fill several volumes and probably alienate the few friends I have left, but there is one more rule I'd like to mention. A rule which embodies both of the Driving Commandments, expedites traffic, and epitomizes courteous driving. A rule which is often ignored but which, if obeyed, would bring bliss to millions of drivers. A rule which is so important it deserves to be called "The Golden Rule of Driving." That rule is: Keep Right Except to Pass.

I learned to drive in a small town in Northern Indiana, a town with no superhighways and almost no multi-lane roads. The downtown shopping district had two lanes in each direction but, as my Driver's Ed instructor pointed out, the right-hand lane was primarily used by people pulling in to or out of parallel parking spots. There was a stretch of the old "Lincoln Highway" just outside of town that actually had three lanes – one lane in each direction and a center "passing lane" which could be used by motorists travelling in either direction. This really drove home the importance of keeping right except to pass, as every time you pulled into the passing lane you were in danger of slamming head-on into a driver passing from the other direction. No one dawdled in the passing lane!

As I gained experience, spread my wings, and drove longer distances I began to use the Interstate Highway System. I found these highways to be a wonderful series of roads with two lanes in each direction. You could cruise along in the right lane, travelling at a safe speed, and if you came up behind a slower car you simply signaled a change to the left lane, passed the slower vehicle, signaled your return to the right lane, and pulled back in to the cruising lane. I learned early on that my idea of a “safe speed” was not the same as everyone else’s. There were always some drivers who wanted to go faster than I did, and some who wanted to drive slower. Later, when I worked for a car dealer, I discovered that new car speedometers could be off by as much as +/- 5 mph, and used cars varied by even more. So, even if everyone tried to drive exactly at the speed limit, some cars would be going faster than others. No matter. The faster car simply pulled into the left hand lane and passed the slower car. Everyone was happy – unless of course there was a driver who failed to keep right. The infamous “poke in the fast lane” as one friend described it. One poke could severely disrupt the traffic flow and create dangerous driving conditions. Worse still, two pokes driving side by side could snarl up traffic for miles and create serious road rage situations.

What do you do when you come up behind a poke in the passing lane? The “Driver’s Ed” solution was to flash your headlights. This was supposed to be a polite request for the other car to pull into the right hand lane. It was also intended to be a courtesy reminder to an inattentive driver who had forgotten to keep right, much as flashing your lights at a car driving without headlights after dark is a polite reminder to turn on their lights. I have heard that in some parts of the world this is a very effective signal; that a quick flash of the headlights will result in the slower car immediately returning to the right lane, with apologies. It does not seem to work that way on any road that I have traveled. I have flashed my lights repeatedly behind slow cars in the passing lane with no success. Some drivers seem totally oblivious. Perhaps they only look at their mirrors while farding. Others appear to notice but simply hunch down, determined to ignore me. Their posture screams “I’ll drive in whatever lane I damn well please. No one should want to drive any faster than this anyway.”

If the other driver refuses to shift right, the only options are to follow him (unacceptable because now you’re being a poke in the fast lane) or to pass on the right. We were warned in Driver’s Ed that this is an extremely dangerous move. Drivers don’t expect you to pass on the

right, it's harder for them to see you on the right, and they're liable to suddenly change lanes themselves and smash into you. I'm told that in Europe passing on the right carries roughly the same social stigma as confessing to a romantic liaison with the family pet, and is more likely to land you in jail. That does not seem to be the case in this country. I see drivers weaving through traffic, passing cars willy-nilly on the right or the left as suits their fancy, and I never see them get a ticket. (I also never see the slow drivers who ignore the "keep right except to pass" signs get a ticket, either.) So, after flashing my lights multiple times to no effect I will check my mirrors, signal a change to the right hand lane, check my mirrors again, and gingerly pass on the right. It would be just my luck to become the first driver in history to get a ticket for doing that.

After many years of rural driving I moved to Atlanta and experienced city driving. There are many more lanes in the city! It's not unusual to have six lanes in each direction and traffic literally flies down these lanes. Except, of course, for the occasional poke in the far left lane. Or the one in the next to the far left lane. Or the lane next to that. Actually, pokes can be found in any lane, even occasionally in the right-hand lane. Their behavior is the same. They stake a claim to one lane and there they stay. It doesn't matter how many people flash their lights and pass them on the right or how many "keep right except to pass" signs they see. They've found their lane and they're sticking to it.

Another feature of urban driving is that there are many secondary roads with multiple lanes in each direction. At certain times of the day traffic can actually move quite briskly on these roads except – you guessed it – there's always somebody in the left hand lane who's driving about 10 mph slower than everyone else. Traffic backs up behind this poke, trying to move into the right hand lane to pass him. The only problem is, that lane is now filled with people who are whizzing past. There may be dozens of cars stuck behind the poke, trying desperately to merge right. Wouldn't traffic flow much better if the poke were in the right hand lane, where people expect slower traffic to live? I know there aren't any traffic signs on these secondary roads telling slower traffic to keep right, and I suspect there are no laws requiring drivers on secondary roads to keep right except to pass, but wouldn't it be a wonderful world if people respected the Golden Rule and did that on their own?

Drive safely – and please, keep right except to pass!

This article expands upon a theme from my book “[Flaming Floorboards](#),” available from [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#).