

Traffic and Tolerance

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Last week I drove to Saratoga Springs for a library conference and managed to catch the rush hour both going to the conference and coming from the conference. Remember all those flying cars and jet packs on Popular Mechanics covers? What happened to those? In addition, what happened to the robot driven auto that could be programmed to navigate to your destination without getting lost? I also want to tell you that the next really useful invention will be the folding car. After you get out of it, you will fold it like a hanky and stuff it in your pocketbook or back pack and never more search for a parking space. As you can tell, I don't get out much when Saratoga Springs can reduce me to a whimpering jelly.

In between conference sessions, I started reading a book called *Traffic*. I don't know what made me pick it up; it's certainly not my usual reading. I don't go around concerned about the length of off ramps or the best way to merge, but, as the author points out in the first pages, the road is where we all meet. We may go to different movies; we may frequent different restaurants, but whether we've dined at the Ritz or McDonald's, once we leave there we're on the same highway. Everyone from teenagers to senior citizens, the rich, the poor, every race, religion and nationality meet on the same roads and, if you add passengers, that pretty much includes everybody.

And the word “meeting” is sometimes too literally the truth. You could almost say that the roads are our new community. We live on those more than we live in practically any other place. How do we figure out how to get along?

Not a blink of an eye ago, in evolutionary terms, we were hunter gatherers, isolated in little bands, going no faster than a quick run. Now we bring a set of responses to each other to the business of going 60-70 mph in complicated maneuvers. What astonished me about the book was that, far from a set of prescription on how to drive well, it was amazing to find how little agreement there is about the best way, or even the legal way, to do things. Many, many encounters involve people trying to figure out what is the best or the most expedient, or the most ethical thing to do in many instances. In other words, it's kind of how we handle our day to day interactions with other people.

We've all complained about modern manners, or the lack thereof, whether on the road or in other public shared places, or at least I'm guilty of some pretty curmudgeonly remarks, and there have been a spate of books and articles dealing with this phenomenon. One suggestion is that, since most of our encounters are anonymous, and we will never see the people we insult, we are freer to behave badly. This is a pretty bleak view of human

nature, but there may be something to it. Cars add to the anonymity, since we don't even see the people unless they are right next to us. The lack of eye contact, it's suggested, makes us more likely to regard the drivers as non-human. We say 'that car just cut me off, not 'that person just cut me off'. Until recently we saw the same people over and over, in many different roles and situation, whether we lived in a small town, or a block in a large city. Small communities do act to put informal brakes on people's behavior. So at the same time we get the freedom that anonymity provides, we also suffer from the loneliness that makes us crave human companionship, human understanding. This may be part of what's making us cranky. As we are lonelier, less constrained, we have less practice in understanding the depth and range of individuals, less understanding of the complexity, not just the superficial, of what makes the other person tick. And, of course, that means they have less understanding of us. Could this actually change the way people are? Could this be a dividing line in the definition of human? Having to suffer fools gladly and having to suffer the people who didn't suffer fools gladly was a sort of exercise of emotions. We may be experiencing flabbiness in more than our midriffs.

Technology has enabled us to retreat into smaller, more homogeneous communities, even if they are virtual rather than real. How many times have

we seen people striding through the mall, talking on their cell phones from one end of it to the other, oblivious to the people actually surrounding them? We all have the potential to reduce our contacts to a small group of like minded individuals, interacting with those who agree with us, informed by those whose views we find congenial.

At the same time we are able to shut our much of the world, the old divisions and stereotypes are rapidly vanishing. The whole world is on the move. The neighborhood is looking different. On the one hand, there is more uniformity, with, for example, standardized stores, products, offices, homes, and, at the same time, the people who inhabit these places are from many different outlooks, backgrounds and cultures. And we all have to figure out how to make this come together in some harmonious manner. I would also be good if we could figure out commonalities asides from all of us wanting the latest flat screen TV, but, at least it's a place to start.

And we simply have more people in general. What used to be called the population explosion doesn't get a lot of press these days. Probably because there were some actions and ideas associated with the population explosion solution that were pretty despicable, or at least not well thought out. The sensitive nature of the topic, encompassing sensitive areas such as birth control, abortion, limiting families, eugenics, cultural differences, and even

ethnic cleansing may have shoved the topic off the front pages, but that doesn't mean that we humans are not increasing at a rather alarming rate. So we have a world that is increasingly filled with displaced people, lots and lots of displaced people, people displaced from their cultural roots, even if they've never left the place they were born. The world is changing at a faster rate than we have ever seen before. Flexibility is supposed to be our watchword, the ability to adapt quickly, constantly. The world many of us grew up in is as gone as if we had moved half-way around the world. And all these alienated, displaced, anonymous people, with their own concerns, priorities, anxieties and ethics meet on our roads, usually at the same time. How do we handle the merge lane, all of us?

One thing that surprised me in this book is that there are different approaches to merging in traffic and one may not be more legal or more right than the other. The part of this that surprised me was that I thought my approach was the only legal and ethical one to have. I'm what's called an early merger. I merge as soon as the sign says that the lane I'm in is going to disappear. This seems to me the only correct thing to do and I sit and fume at cars that drive past me, only to appear later, mutely begging me to let them in when the two lanes have funneled together. Does anyone else also fume at these inconsiderate, selfish bullies? Well, it turns out that, in

the first place, there's no law about merging. We've all been kind of making it up. And those presumptuous late mergers may have been the good citizens after all, keeping both lanes flowing more smoothly and quickly until they become as one. So my deeply held convictions took a knock and I had to reconsider the self-righteous nature of my fuming.

I would like us all to consider how we enter the merge lane in this church. In many ways we are the place where people with different customs, different backgrounds, different approaches to problems, different ways of thinking about ethics and morality, as well as different desires, anxieties, joys, sorrows and concerns merge together without even a creed to bind us. Is it merge or crash? Well, it has been both.

We have no creed to bind us but what we have is a shared interest in a place in which people who are seriously considering the most significant questions that humanity has ever posed can come together in a common search. I do believe, without, I hope, too much chauvinism, that this is the full flowering of religious thought. Religion has moved from being a force which belonged to a particular group in a particular place, a force which was irrelevant for any group other than this, to becoming mobile, belonging to a group no matter where they went, as it became for the Jews, to being considered as a force which could potentially belong to any group in any

place, as long as they were willing to accept certain creeds and not go beyond the limits set by those beliefs. We have gone a step further. We are a great experiment which says it is possible to examine the most ancient questions, the most modern discoveries, in one place, together, even if we all draw different conclusions. Then what is our binding force?

I believe that which keeps us together is more like commitment than similar belief. When we have commitment to the same goal, it doesn't matter what our beliefs are. If the goal is keeping alive a place where all are welcome, then that is the commitment which will keep us together. If the goal is keeping alive a place where we can seek truth in freedom, then that is the commitment that will empower us to go forward.

If commitment is vital, what will keep us together is respect for each other. Respect does not place people or their beliefs in a hierarchy. Respect does not say my spirituality is better than your spirituality. Respect recognizes that each of us is a sincere seeker, and that seekers will find different answers at different times. It is a respect for both the journey and the sojourners.

As Forrest Church, minister of All Souls U-U in NYC recently said, ours is the humblest of religions, because we do not say we have the ultimate answer. I think humility is a good way to approach whatever is considered

holy, whatever is considered divine. The amazing thing is that everyone here, if I were to go around the sanctuary, would be considering something different when we talk about the holy, when we talk about the divine, (and don't feel guilty if I caught you right now considering lunch). Because if you were not and did not, you would not be here. For some, the holy resides in the unseen, the unheard, a place beyond our normal understanding. For others, the wonder that is found through a deep understanding of all we see here, of all of nature, of the universe unfolding in unimaginable power and might gives a glimpse of the divine. Others see the divine in each person they meet. For some, the sacred is revealed in art, or music, or poetry or science. For some, the spiritual is ineffable and transcendent. For others it is embodied in the everyday. And for many of us, our search has taken us to many of those places, and yet we put back on our boots, pick up our walking stick and march on.

The sanctuary is the name for this room, a place of haven, a place apart from the world and a safe harbor. It is the heart of the church, its center. I would like to think of it, both the visible and invisible of it, as a place where we provide space and grace for each person here, space to grow and grace to support the growing. When we leave here we return to the known, the mundane, the secular, but for this group of voyagers that world is not

enough. We find we need reverence; we need a wider sense of life, a greater sense of wholeness in a world that would often reduce us to the status of objects to be used.

Many people may need this space in the future. I certainly hope so. But right now we know there are people who need it here, around us. I would ask for us all to think of that person who you have the most difficulty understanding or accepting. I would like you to think of how you can help to create space and grace for that person in your own heart and mind. Then, how can we begin to create space and grace for all who are here, for all who may potentially come here. Late mergers or early mergers, how can we understand each other to help each other on this highway.

Let us be together in silence.