

August Safety Article: The Road of Righteousness

For years I have been accused of being bi-polar in my preferences for transportation. My preferred vehicle is my motorcycle, and is the complete opposite of being nestled away inside my oversized, three-quarter ton, four-wheel-drive truck. I love that truck and its three tons of steel wrapped around me to keep me safe. The motorcycle is a different story, though. It's war out there to stay upright and alive in the urban environments and on the super-slabs. One really lets it all hang out when riding on two wheels and the rewards are thrilling. The risks, however....

Consider the effects that your workday has on you. Your customers are never satisfied, your boss consistently nags at you and the review he just gave you made you want to poke him in the eyes. Because you are in demand and there is never enough help to cover the workload, you skip lunch and want nothing more than to be at home, but first comes the commute with 287,000 other commuters who had their equal share of work problems and are driving into the sunshine while looking at their hand-held phones more than looking at the road. This is why I loathe highway traffic. Even when in my overbuilt pickup truck, it just isn't safe. It isn't natural. It isn't fun. It isn't freedom. It isn't the way God intended us to live. It sucks away our soul. It is hours of poor quality living in our day that we will never, ever get back.

So, we rush to get our way through it. We find every advantage we can to get even one vehicle ahead of the others so we can just get home faster and avoid any potential accidents that happen, because once there is a fender-bender, we know we will be sitting on that super-slab, staring into the sun, in the 100-degree heat, for an hour or two.

Can you relate to any of this?

As it happens with many of us, our frustrations of the day come to being let out on the highways, much like everyone else. When tensions are high, so come the attitudes, and the aggressive driver behaviors that are unfavorable for those of us on two wheels.

Many of us, as motorcyclists, are strong-willed with heavy amounts of fortitude or we wouldn't be on two wheels in the first place. It's a place of freedom, being on two wheels. How dare those lemmings in commuter cars try to push us around? Who do these truck drivers think they are? Can't they see that their behaviors are putting me, a motorcyclist, at risk? I know they see me, so they better respect my space! By golly, I'll show them!

Those feelings and attitudes are the ones that end up causing....well....dead motorcyclists, and I am just as guilty as anyone out there, fighting the same war, with the same two-second bubble of space around me that continues to be incessantly violated. It's why I avoid metropolitan areas and interstate highways with my routes of choice. Discomfort with a traffic situation leads to frustration. Frustration will present itself as anger with very little of a trigger and that is when people lose control.

Gone are the days where people will simply flip the universal hand-gesture of displeasure, as anger will lead itself into fits of rage on the highways. It can be passive forms of aggression such as speeding up making it difficult for you pass around them at a safe speed or in a safe distance. No contact, no harm, just someone with a behavior that needs to be avoided.

I say avoided, because trying to educate that driver through a reaction of yours can also turn to something violent, as more significant behaviors will cause the vehicle driver to attack the motorcyclist with their vehicle. There may be contact, or there may not, but their vehicle just became a threat to your safety because the other driver may have felt emotionally threatened by your maneuver in retaliation to their action.

Another concern that has come into proliferation over the last decade or so, and exponentially so lately, is the carrying of firearms and other weapons in vehicles and concealed on the persons driving them. Your 110 cubic inch engine may be fast, but it can't outrun the 1,100 feet per second of a jacketed hollow-point as delivered courtesy of Mr. Smith & Mr. Wesson. This is a very real threat that you always need to consider when assessing the environment around you, riding or not.

What if the other driver persists in being a threat to you by tailgating, or leaving their headlamp beams on high, or slamming on brakes in front of you? What if they repeatedly cut you off from your lane of traffic, or decide they want to run you off the road? Do you further educate the driver of their inappropriate behavior toward you (meaning to retaliate a driver's aggressive behavior)? Do you toss lug nuts or ball bearings into their windshield? Do you kick in a door panel? Do you muzzle-flash them with your own concealed weapon? It's hard to be humble when you're a motorcyclist, but being smart doesn't mean being a wimp, it means you're being smart! Smart riders live to ride another day.

When emotionally charged by a threat, it is hard to de-escalate a situation. Oftentimes, though, you must in order to survive. A motorcycle rider will always come out on the losing end against a foreign object, whether a vehicle or other type of threat. Simply avoid them, and do so at all costs. If it means pulling off onto another street, do so. You need cover from that malcontent driver! It could also mean slowing way down to let the other person be on their way. You aren't ever in the rush that they feel they have to be in. Just be cautious to not create a hazard for driver behind you in the process. If you need to speed up as an evasive action, then safely do so, while minding the safety of those on your bike with you. Do so only as an evasive action to find a place to get off the road and away from the threatening driver until you feel safe and have emotionally recovered enough to not exact revenge on the next person that cuts you off from your path of travel. Trust me, there will be a next one...and a next one...and a next one!

The ultimate point is to put something between you and your threat. If no way out is available, try using a tractor-trailer rig as a barrier or, if you're lucky, a law enforcement vehicle of some sort. There is nothing wrong with seeking law enforcement support in this situation and it could save your life, just don't be the antagonist in this story.

Riding motorcycles requires active participation by being aware of your surroundings and prudently handling your machine. However, it is meant to be a joyful experience. After all, there is a reason you never find motorcycles in the parking lot of a psychologist's office!

Keep calm, have patience, breathe deep, and show courtesy and grace when possible in congested traffic. (Yes, even when the trucker in front of you cuts off your passing lane for the third time.) Ride smart, arrive home in one piece, and live to ride another day.

...and "Hey! Let's be CAREFUL out there!"