

Gone in an Instant—Casualties of the Road

Although I try to push my own personal memories to the background of my life, any one event, thought or comment can trigger them—at any moment, at any place, at any time. In one recent instance, many of the memories of losing my daughter came flooding back when a highly publicized automobile crash made the news. The case was dubbed the “Flower Girl Case.” It was a tragically sad story involving a drunken driver who crossed the median and hit a limousine carrying a beautiful little girl returning home from a family wedding. The seven-year-old was killed instantly as she slept in the back seat. Her mother, frozen by that instant in time, could only sit and watch as the events slowly unfolded in front of her.

I am told the mother held her lifeless little girl for over an hour not wanting to let go or say goodbye. Having been in a similar situation, though many years ago, I couldn’t stop the tears from flowing when I heard this story. In fact, every grown man and woman who knows this story cries just thinking about it.

As painful and as life-changing as my daughter’s death was, I cannot even begin to imagine how devastating it must be to know you are the

one responsible for a fatal collision. The young man who caused this senseless death was driving drunk. He was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. But his sentence goes far beyond that. His never-ending nightmare is that he is forced to think about the lives he's changed each and every day, desperately wishing he had not caused that trauma.

And his was only one automobile crash in one city, in one state, on one day in the United States. Every year, there are almost 43,000 deaths on our roadways and 127,000 in the European Region¹. That's 170,000 driving-related deaths each and every year, and that's not even counting Asia and other developing regions.

Another way to look at the impact of these incidents is the monetary loss. Nearly a half trillion dollars in property, casualty and workers' compensation loss occurs as a result of this worldwide devastation. That's \$518 billion. Or expressed another way, that's \$518,000,000,000. And that's only in the United States and the European Region. What about the rest of the world?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), road traffic crashes kill 1.2 million people a year—or an average of 3,242 people each and every day. In addition, road traffic crashes injure or disable between 20 million and 50 million people a year. And, road traffic crashes rank as the eleventh leading cause of death and account for 2.1 percent of all deaths globally.²

There Are No Accidents

But are these really accidents? I argue that they are not. These events do not just happen as an accident. They are predictable and they are preventable. These accidents do not need to occur.

Take two several-thousand-pound vehicles trying to occupy the same place at the same time. If the result is a tie, then certainly there will be physical damage to the vehicle, but there may also be human damage, and it might be fatal. If the incident is "lucky" enough not to be fatal, there is still damage to the humans, damage to the vehicles and damage to the psyche.

The word to keep in mind is "lucky." Blessed with good fortune. Occurring by chance. Keep these phrases in mind because the opposite phenomenon is also true. When we drive and take risks, whether we're cutting corners, rushing or multi-tasking without ever having received a ticket or bent a fender, we are subtly reinforcing the notion that we

can behave in this irresponsible manner. Why? Because there are not now, never were before, and never will be (by extension) any bad things happening as a result of our risk-taking. The result is that this makes us supremely confident, bold and, yes, aggressive. This is all fine and well until our luck runs out. Or, our good fortune is gone.

And, as the statistics prove, our collective luck does run out. Eventually, the very sobering point is that, despite all of our collective best intentions by well-educated, responsible, licensed drivers with families and friends, houses and mortgages, hopes and dreams, the luck runs out for more than 465 of us in the U.S. and in the European Region each and every day. That's nineteen deaths an hour. That's one death every three minutes. And as I said before, that's only in the United States and the European Region.

Immortality versus Risk

Everyone thinks they're immortal. There is a funny aspect to human nature that protects us against undue fear or hopelessness. We always assume that the terrible things we read and hear about are only for the other guy; they will not happen to us. What, me worry?

However, when Christopher Reeve got on his horse that fateful day, he was certainly not thinking that his life, and the lives of those around him would change forever. He never considered that his luck would run out. Riding horses was his passion, and a fear of riding them would have kept him from what he loved and did best.

Howard Hughes was a great aviator, yet crashing planes did not deter him from his passion. Nor did it slow down the millionaire aviator, Stephen Fossett, still lost in the southwest desert. Or the hundreds of people who attempt to scale Mount Everest or Mount McKinley each and every year.

This belief system, which acts as a defense mechanism to shield us from paralyzing fear, is also what allows us to move forward with a healthy positive attitude and engage in those things that make life interesting and worthwhile. These acts of courage and involvement become the fabric of life that weave a meaningful tapestry and provide context for the mundane and uneventful moments of our existence.

Paradoxically, this same positive mental attitude that provides protection from debilitating fear also introduces risk to our physical well-being. All under the mental fortress of "It will never happen to me."

But in my family's case, reality quickly hit when we discovered, through my daughter's death, that sometimes the unthinkable actually can happen, and not just to the other guy. Once we repatriated back to the United States, we needed to start constructing what would become of the rest of us. And what would become of the rest of our lives. After finding no devil with whom to make a deal for my daughter's safe return, and finally stabilizing my own life to a point of actually wanting to go on living, I progressed through the denial phase of the healing process. It is a phase that everyone must work through in their own individual way.

The Phoenix Rising

Believe me, there are enough self-help books and seminars on the various stages of grief that my own personalized experiences cannot add to that body of knowledge. However, what I can tell you that is interesting and insightful—and impacts each and everyone of us—is that, like the phoenix rising out of the ashes, another life can emerge.

By overcoming fire, death and old age, the phoenix represents triumph over adversity and rebirth into glory, thereby providing hope and constancy. In my case, the story is one of triumph and hope. I survived and overcame fire and death (literally) and old age (metaphorically). I rose from the ashes and my new life emerged.

All in all, life is precious and worth living every moment to its fullest. After every dark cloud, there really is a clearing on the horizon. This was reinforced again when my family had to evacuate our home due to the San Diego wildfires. “What do we pack? What's important? What can we live without?”

The richness and fullness of every experience is priceless for what you can take out of it and carry with you. Internalize each and every moment as insight and armor against other experiences that will inevitably intersect with you as you go about the business of building your own version of a Norman Rockwell painting.

And, remember that the next time you are behind the wheel and you enter a construction zone or get cut off by that rude bastard in front of you, or you get that text message or hear that cell phone ring, try to discipline yourself that these hard life lessons will come soon enough. They'll arrive on their own without you opening the invitational door

wider for them. Cars don't cause accidents. People do. Being on the receiving end of a fatal tragedy is hard enough; you don't want to be the responsible party inflicting such pain and trauma on others. I've lived through the loss of a life; I don't want you to have to go through that too.

¹ WHO European Region is defined as: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Uzbekistan

² *World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention*, World Health Organization, 2004