

**Learning and Accidents:
Changes which improve your health by James L. Holly, MD
Your Life Your Health *The Examiner* May 17, 2007**

Watch words for safety: "Slowing down," "holding on," "looking twice," or "even three times," "thinking before acting." As summer and family travel approaches, I offer the following as a caution to us all about traveling safely. It seems that almost every day we hear of someone we know being seriously injured in a car wreck. Often those who are injured, or worse, were not "at fault." As we age, we must be aware that our reflexes are not what they once were; our balance is not as good as it could be and our vision does not give us the signals we need to avoid accidents. If we do not learn these lessons and adjust accordingly, we will inevitably find ourselves the victim of an injury.

It is not only in driving however, that we need to make adjustments. I remember when I started holding on to the railing or banister when I went down stairs. That caution resulted from a combination of all of the sensory changes which take place as we age.

We don't have to stop living; we just have to change the way we approach life. "Slowing down," "holding on," "looking twice," or "even three times," "thinking before acting" are as important to your health as regular check ups and preventative health care.

The following are experiences from which I learned lessons about driving. I hope these stories encourage you to learn as well. On October 10, 1966, almost forty-one years ago, I had an automobile accident. Another driver ran a red-light and destroyed my car. I was seriously injured but recovered completely. I learned a lesson from that incident: even though you have the "right of way," it doesn't mean that it will be given to you. Since that time, I have never approached a light which was green without observing the crossing traffic to make sure that others were heeding their red light. I learned from my accident.

On Saturday, May 1, 2004, I was returning alone from my parents' home in Natchitoches, Louisiana. It was raining heavily and I was traveling too fast for the weather conditions on a long, straight stretch of road. At one point, I realized that I did not have traction on the road. I could only hope that I would regain that traction as there was nothing else I could do. If I hit the brakes, it wouldn't help and might hurt. If I tried to turn the steering wheel, it would only make matters worse. In a moment, and the instant is frozen in my memory and plays over and over in slow motion, my vehicle began to slide. The left rear began to "catch up" with the front of the truck. I was grateful that nothing was coming, for it there had been another vehicle; a collision would have been inevitable. At the worst point, my vehicle was sliding sideways down the road at seventy miles an hour.

At the speed I was traveling, the possibility that my vehicle would roll over was real. At that moment, I was grateful that I had my seat belt on. A year ago, I probably would not have. However, my friend, colleague and partner, Dr. Keith Stout, an outstanding

emergency physician, had convinced me that seat belts were life savers. I had mine on, and it was a good thing, as I would not have had time to put it on.

Suddenly, however, my tires gained traction which was a good thing. Still, I was traveling fast and my front end was directed about 30 degrees off the center of the highway. I knew better than to try to correct that and the truck shot off the road. I knew there were no obstacles at the side of the road, so that was not so bad. Perhaps all that I was going to get out of this was a good scare and a lot of mud. But, then I saw it. I had not noticed it before because it was there for only a short distance; it was a concrete ditch. To prevent erosion, a concrete ditch about ten-inches deep and twelve-inches wide with sides had been constructed along side the road about twenty feet from the highway. There was no way that I could miss it.

I knew the impact was going to be violent. I was still going fast and there was no time to brake. When I hit the ditch, I was braced, but more importantly my seat belt was securely fastened and tight. While the contents of my Denali went flying, I did not. The reading glasses in my shirt pocket flew out and landed on the floor, but I did not move, as I was secured by my seat belt. The initial impact was enormous. I was certain that the tires were blown out and that the front end was destroyed, but the truck continued through the ditch, out the other side, up an embankment which caused the vehicle to turn and it went back through the ditch and out the side next to the road.

By this time, I had regained control, as the vehicle had slowed significantly. Several things were obvious:

1. I was still alive.
2. I was unhurt
3. My vehicle was still moving
4. I now had control
5. I accelerated slightly and the vehicle responded.
6. All of the gauges were intact -- the oil pan was not destroyed
7. My brakes were barely working
8. Several things were rubbing against my tires
9. My cell phone was "out of range" with "no service"
10. It was raining very hard

One other thing was obvious, I felt really stupid, but it was too late to do anything about that. At a very slow speed, I drove into Leesville, Louisiana and found a front-end and brake shop which was open. I pulled into an open bay and asked a young man to access the damage to see if I could drive home. I called my wife. It turned out I was able to drive home.

In the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament of the Bible, there are seven different Hebrew words which are translated "fool." While they have subtle differences of meaning, at the root all mean the same thing: a fool is one who cannot learn from his mistakes. The question is, will I learn from this experience? I love to travel but I hate

taking time to do it. Typically, I allocate a certain amount of time for travel and then squeeze myself and my vehicle into that allocation. That is a mistake. The question is, "Will I stop doing that?"

I am grateful for several things about this incident:

- I am grateful that I was alone, although if I had not been, I would surely have driven differently.
- I am grateful to be alive, although there is no rational explanation for why I am. I do thank God for my safety and survival. I attribute to His Sovereign will that I did survive. I quickly acknowledge however that that bespeaks of no merit on my behalf, as I know many far more deserving of survival than have not. It shall remain a mystery in this life as to why some survive and others do not. For a believer, such as me, that mystery creates an awe, a worship of God, which results in praise and gratitude when we do survive and thanksgiving and acceptance in our hearts when those we love do not. In neither case is the merit nor lack of merit of the one involved an issue in whether they survive or not.
- I am grateful that my friend taught me that I should wear my seat belt. I shall become an evangelist for seat belts and I shall always wear mine, as shall anyone who is willing to ride with me in the future.
- I am grateful for a tire manufacturer who produced a product which could endure the abuse of that collision and still keep functioning.
- I am grateful for a vehicle which is constructed such that the passenger compartment is insulated as much as is possible from the force of that collision.
- I am also grateful for the stability of that vehicle so that it did not roll over.
- I am grateful for the two young men who helped me in Leesville, Louisiana.
- I am grateful for being home with my family and for having another opportunity for learning, which ultimately makes it possible for me not to be a fool.

It is sobering to face the possibility of death or serious injury, particularly when it is not for a noble purpose, but because of carelessness. At another time, I have asked the Lord to allow me to live to see my grandchildren's grandchildren, which will be my great, great grandchildren. To do that, I must live well into my late 90s. That means that I must eat right, exercise regularly, get appropriate check-ups, practice preventive medicine on myself, and above all, I must not be a fool. For all of the antioxidants and miles walked will avail nothing, if as a fool, I confront death again because of foolish behavior.

In the intervening years, I have experienced a healthy anxiety when driving in rain. Just as I always approach a green light with caution, I now "slow down," when it is even lightly raining. But, "slowing down" is not only important in rain. We all must know and remember the power and force of a one to two thousand pound object traveling at a speed of 50-80 miles an hour. And, we must be aware of the energy which is transmitted to the human body when that force is decelerated instantly in a collision is overwhelming. It sometimes is hard to remember what can happen when everything is going right. Sadly, when things stop going right, it is too late to adjust.

Remember, it is your life and it is your health.