

Commentary Unbelted and asking for death

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

A newspaper report on a traffic accident told a familiar story: "The vehicle rolled and she was ejected."

She also died, of course. That's frequently what happens when a car rolls with an unbelted person on board.

I acquired that sad knowledge as a young reporter years ago when seat belts first came on the scene. I covered the police and education. And with all due respect to the affable law enforcement officers, I was never crazy about the police beat. I preferred the school beat, where 90 percent of the news was happy. There was little that was uplifting about covering the police, apart from noticing their admirable bravery that keeps us safe. But there is something about murder, theft and traffic mayhem that isn't fun. It's not fun at all.

Education was mostly a cheerful scene - children being crammed to the gills with the knowledge they would need to graduate and soar. A school has a noisy hum of hyper children getting their daily dose of words, numbers, science, lunch and large helpings of play.

Law enforcement was a different matter. There was something grim about the contrast between watching kids master their times tables and watching adults turn the tables and get jail time for costly lapses in their lives.

Worst of all was the mayhem of traffic accidents. That could be hard to take. I was sent one day to the scene of a fatal crash involving a family. I pulled up just in time to see ambulance personnel carrying off the bodies of two toddlers, covered in blankets, with their utterly limp little legs dangling down in plain sight - legs the size of my children's legs.

But amidst all the carnage of the police beat came one encouraging bright spot - seat belts. Those devices that were standard in race cars were gradually appearing in private automobiles. They didn't come with new cars at first. But garages and service clubs started installing them for people.

The results were dramatic. Automobiles holding two people would roll. One person would survive. The other would die. One was wearing a seat belt. The other wasn't wearing a seat belt. The belted passenger lived. The unbelted passenger died.

The same pattern appeared over and over, too many times to be a coincidence.

However, a harmful myth arose in those early days. Some people jumped to the conclusion that passengers without seat belts were more likely to survive because unbelted passengers would be "thrown clear."

In reality, they were more likely to be thrown clear through the windshield.

The cops knew from personal experience that the myth was baloney. A state policeman explained it to me. He said that when a car rolls, the centrifugal force tends to throw unbelted passengers into the path of the rolling vehicle. The passengers are crushed.

It didn't take much experience with the success of seat belts before people paying attention recognized the obvious value and decided they wanted safety belts in their own rigs.

I haven't neglected to buckle up in 40 years. And fortunately, the chickens came home to roost - the life-saving chickens, bless their feathered little hearts. A few years ago, my wife and I were in a head-on highway crash. Washington state troopers told us that, in their opinion, we wouldn't have survived without seat belts.

To this day, I want to scream when I see a story like the one in that newspaper the other day: "The vehicle rolled and she was ejected."

I didn't even have to read all the story to see if she was wearing her seat belt. She wasn't, of course.

The odd thing is, I don't doubt that most of the people killed in that situation knew better. They don't doubt these days that bashing into a tree, a truck or another car gives a person a strong possibility of death if they don't buckle up. There's too much evidence to the contrary.

That leaves me to suspect that they are, in their opinion, the anointed. It is not their destiny to die. That only happens to other people. They are immortal.

Those unbelted drivers are wrong, sometimes dead wrong.

I wonder if teachers know the answer to why people are so foolish. I don't. But I do know the relevant question: When will they learn? When will they ever learn?

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