

**Column in CST, Nov. 1, 2014. Editor's Headline: "Getting older means risky driving"**

Baby Boomers are reaching retirement age. Presently, 10,000 Americans are turning 65 every day. When I read this statistic I said to myself: "That's a lot of potentially impaired drivers on the road. Gotta watch out."

Of course, I am a "potentially impaired driver" myself, as I was reminded recently, taking an online "Smart Drivers" safety course. The sessions repeatedly explain that, once we've past 55, memory begins to fail, however slightly at first; the split-second reactions of an earlier time has slowed; peripheral and night vision aren't what they used to be, and our ability to accurately judge distances tends to lessen. At a roundabout or an intersection, an approaching vehicle may seem to arrive "out of nowhere." When driving at night we may become confused, not recognizing an otherwise familiar neighborhood.

Here's an astonishing fact: Tickets for traffic violations to older drivers, and the accidents we cause, are primarily due to failure to yield right-of-way. At first blush, this statistic seems incongruous: retirees are not rushed like commuters; we have the luxury of scheduling our driving during traffic "off" hours, and we don't push nearly the miles of people driving to and from—or for—a job. Still, there are all these failures to yield.

Turns out, the phenomenon is due to the "out of nowhere" perception: we tend to misjudge the distance of the other driver or the speed with which the vehicle approaches. In fact, a collision I caused in my early Cheyenne days engendered this "out of nowhere" in my initial reaction. I was traveling east on 22nd Street—hardly a cesspool of seething traffic—yet failed to take note of a vehicle on Capitol Avenue approaching from the right. The bright sunlight of that late-February morning proved disorienting, and the dark color of the approaching vehicle added to the misperception.

Previously I was commuting within Nashville, Tennessee, where rush-hour traffic is humongous but where a subtropical climate produces low-hanging clouds. I rarely used sunglasses even in summer. Removing to Wyoming, I was unaware that the sun's glare at altitude is much more intrusive than at sea level. Within days of my relocation I learned a painful lesson about failing to make sufficient allowance for "unfamiliar" surroundings even when streets and traffic seem ordinary.

I've taken Smart Drivers training several times since then. It's good to know what errors we're prone to, and thus be vigilant about our driving behavior. Each time I have found that there's something new to learn, something important to consider.

For example, the Smart Drivers program reiterates the impairment-effect of even one alcoholic drink. Taken at 10 PM at night, the next morning that one drink still slows our reaction time and influences our thinking for the worse.

The course covers the implications of environmental changes as well, for the ever-increasing traffic and the repeated changes in roadside landscapes can be bewildering. Roundabouts have proliferated, traffic signs are everywhere, rumble strips we never noticed before rudely remind us to get off the side of the road. A refresher recaps the changes we may have barely noticed that nonetheless disorient at unexpected times.

In the past I've taken the classroom version rather than the online test, since completion of either earns a discount on auto insurance. After taking the online version, I'm a believer in the latter. The material permits us to linger on personal problem areas, to review sections that remain a bit

fuzzy, and to update answers we didn't get right the first time. It makes for a more self-reliant experience and brings enhanced confidence to our driving. By the way, the course prompted me to schedule an appointment to have my vision tested once again.

The working life brings many awful stressors, sometimes precipitating psychosomatic afflictions that can take years to abate. The retired life, however, contains its own stressors. As we no longer add significantly to the fabric of family and society, a sense of loss makes itself felt. Having passed all the high points of life, we may feel we're going downhill, fearing we'll end up in some terminal-care facility, inert and withdrawn. Such fearful imaginings don't lend themselves to paying attention to exercise and good nutrition—things we may have neglected during our working years—and can engender their own self-fulfilling prophecies. All the more important, then, to devise a regime of regular mealtimes, preferably with home-cooked meals that emphasize fresh vegetables and minimize refined ingredients; of regular exercise, preferably in social settings that motivate continuous involvement; of learning new things via reading and discussion groups. Taking the Smart Drivers test helps older drivers be safe on the road, and it contributes to keeping the mind alert.