

Sunday April 22, 2012

The problem of speed addiction

By Jim Taylor

The motorcycle's exhaust note rises from a muted roar to a vicious snarl. The revs soar, the engine screams, the highway whips by as if someone pushed the fast-forward button....

It sounds like a Hollywood chase scene. But this actually happened on the TransCanada Highway near Victoria, BC, earlier this month.

A motorcyclist riding a 2006 Yamaha YZF-R1 cranked the throttle open and ripped through traffic at 299 km/hr, about 186 mph. This was no sudden impulse, a squirt of speed to pass slow-moving vehicles. This was intentional – the rider fastened a video camera to his bike, and posted his escapade to YouTube on April 8.

Or maybe two cameras, because I've seen two video versions of this ride, shot from slightly different positions on the bike. One video runs just under two minutes, the other almost three. The shorter video shows the rider zooming around cars, slicing between a truck and an RV, passing at well over twice the speed of other occupants of the road. The longer video also shows the rider screaming past a pod of cars -- in the bicycle lane along the side of the highway!

Mixture of emotions

I'm both horrified and fascinated. Because I was once young too. And if I had owned a machine capable of that kind of performance, I too might have been tempted to test its capabilities – though not, I hasten to add, on a busy highway.

Fortunately for me (and perhaps for everyone else), the motorcycle I owned in those days tended to blow an oil line under any kind of exertion. And my cars were all small British sedans with such underwhelming power that I rarely needed to brake for corners.

But speed is intoxicating. A friend used a tail wind and a slight downslope to coax his Triumph TR3 sports car briefly up to 120 mph, the tachometer pegged at 6000 rpm. On an empty road, I emphasize.

That sprint was simultaneously one of the most exciting experiences I have ever had, and one of the most terrifying. It gave the same orgasmic rush, I suspect, as sky-diving or bungee-jumping.

I cite those stories to counter any charges that I'm an aging fuddy-duddy who can't understand the thrill of a high performance machine. I can, and I do. It's a kick like few others. But like any other addiction, it requires rigorous self-control. And 299 km/hr on a busy highway is not self-control.

Repeating pattern of behaviour

If there were any instant justice in this world, the speeding motorcyclist's cameras should have recorded his own death. It would have provided a vivid illustration of Charles Darwin's principle of natural selection – the foolish and the foolhardy eliminate themselves from the gene pool.

Tragically, they often take innocent victims with them. A Victoria police officer estimated that at 299 km/hr, the motorcycle became a projectile that could have split a car in half.

In the shorter video clip, I counted 72 vehicles passed in less than two minutes. But I might have missed some, because he slashed through the narrow gap between two lines of vehicles faster than I could count them.

The motorcycle itself has been seized. Police allege that the 25-year-old rider had no licence, no insurance, and 27 previous driving infractions.

Unfortunately, we can't legislate against stupidity. But we could make it less easy to be stupid.

Preventative laws

I've stated, in previous columns, that I think speed limits on Canadian highways are outdated. When I started driving in the 1950s, most highways had 50 mph limits, equivalent to 80 km/hr today. Since then cars, tires, and roads have all improved enormously. We now have disk brakes, seat belts, crumple zones, and air bags. But most speed limits have gone up only 10 or maybe 20 km/hr.

If that's the speed our legislators consider safe, why should they let manufacturers produce and promote machines that will go three times faster?

I'm not talking just about motorcycles, although they outperform almost any four-wheeled vehicle. The Yamaha in question had 127 horsepower stock, and weighed just 400 pounds – a power-to-weight ratio that no car short of a Formula One racer can match.

But if you have the money, you can go into several luxury-car showrooms today and drive out with a 500-horsepower car. No questions asked about your ability to handle that much power; no questions about your mental attitude....

There's some gross hypocrisy here. Because no one – I repeat, no one – needs 500 horsepower on today's roads.

There are only two reasons for having that kind of power – to race, or to show off. Neither belongs on public roads.

If our authorities seriously believe that current speed limits are necessary to prevent highway carnage, they should be equally serious about regulating the sale of vehicles that make a mockery of those limits.

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YOUR TURN

Several readers told me that they had forwarded last week's column about PTSD on to their own mailing lists, as a kind of antidote to newspaper reports that treat the civil war in Syria the same way they treat a hockey game – winners, losers, injuries....

Nancy Kerr wrote about two subjects: "A fellow counsellor friend was seeing patients with PTSD from the VietNam War in a VA Vet Hospital in the 1990's. My father, a Chaplain in WWII who refused to carry a gun, went through the South Pacific Theater as far as Iwo Jima. When he was mustered out in 1946, he took a church in Colorado. Formerly a mild, composed man, he had little control over tears or anger. It wasn't called shock, wasn't diagnosed as anything, but for many years he slept in the church study so that his family wouldn't hear his vocal nightmares.

"While War may finally have pressured us to find a label for PTSD, I'm glad it defines all psychological trauma for any age and circumstance. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, Trauma is trauma is trauma."

Then Nancy had some further thoughts about teachers: "My reply to the reader who proposed that good teachers want to teach and if paid more, the profession just attracts those who want the money. To me teachers are important to the future of a society and should be paid commensurately with their value. As the population ages, us

old folks seem to have forgotten how important teachers were to what each of achieved in our lifetime; we seem to begrudge providing for grandchildren.”

I would add to Nancy’s affirmation that those wealthy CEOs who desire lower taxes on their own incomes, and reduced public spending, have already gained enormous benefit from those taxes – they did not pay for the education of all those employees whose efforts make the bosses/owners so wealthy.

Heather Nemeth sent me a article from the New York Times which corroborated my comments about PTSD among returning military personnel. It’s subtitle said, “For returning soldiers, home has been deadlier than the battlefield.”

And now two letters about other subjects.

The readers of my columns tend to take a more liberal view than, say, hard-core members of the NRA. For those readers, Art Gans recommend a book by what he calls “one of the leftest of the leftist historians of American policy.” The book is Howard Zinn’s “A History of the American Empire.”

Dave Rattray wrote about “all the gobbledegook in April 8th’s issue. I’m not a computer geek, nor any other kind of geek (as far as I know) but, I clicked on your blog address and read your column in all its glorious and splendid artistic form.”

If the goobledgook problem ever returns, it’s wise advice – for that occasion, go to edges.canadahomepage.net, and you should get the same material without all the encoded garbage.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won’t make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you’ll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
