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Road rage may not be permissible, but it sure can be understandable

*By Diether Haenicke
May 20, 2009*

Many years ago, I read a report about a tourist who killed a man in a fight over a parking spot at a scenic outlook in the Bavarian Alps. He had been waiting for a free space for a long time, saw a car pull out, but just at that moment another car approached and barreled into the vacated spot. No protests could move the quicker driver to relinquish the space, a knife was drawn, and the man who had won the parking spot paid for it with his life. I think of this incident whenever I hear the term road rage.

I myself never give in to road rage. My fighting skills are no match for any potential object of my road rage, and so I let reason prevail over raw emotion. However, the feeling itself is not alien to me.

Who doesn't occasionally feel provoked to the point of real annoyance? I am only mildly annoyed by people who steer with one hand, hold a cell phone in the other, thus can't put on turn signals but nevertheless negotiate abrupt turns. But my annoyance increases when road signs indicate for miles that I am approaching construction with one-lane traffic.

Getting in the correct lane, I slow down while dozens of cars fly by at unreduced speed, squeezing in a mile ahead of me. When I come to the merging point myself, I try to stare down the squeezers, but they know how to avoid eye contact. They look straight ahead knowing full well that eventually I will yield, gnashing my teeth, furious, but essentially helpless. Road rage swells up in me. My wife, who usually sits next to me and who is a nicer person than I am, remarks that I am petty. Right she is -- but so what? This behavior truly galls me.

A milder form of annoyance, much lower in intensity, visits me occasionally when I look for a convenient parking spot. The lot is full, but I spot a person loaded with shopping bags on her way to a car. She opens the trunk leisurely and takes ample time loading the

loot, while I wait patiently for her to leave. She knows I am waiting. Then, she shuts the trunk, and returns to the store for more recreational shopping. Meanwhile, other good spots in the area have all been filled. A quick hand signal that she wasn't leaving would have been nice.

Or how about the fellow who returns to his car, ready to vacate the space you lust for. He loads his purchases and sinks into the driver's seat. He knows you are waiting. But first he must arrange his billfold, readjust his seat until it is just so, and find a cigarette and a match to light it with. When he finally starts the car, he first takes time to find an appropriate radio station, before he at last shifts into reverse and pulls out. To the impatient man in a hurry, what takes three minutes appears to be an eternity.

Another annoying habit can be observed in owners of new or expensive cars who attempt to avoid scratches when other drivers open their doors. They park their cars carefully in the center of two spaces in order to prevent any damage to their status symbols. But there is also the sloppy parker who mindlessly parks so close to your car that, when you return, you have to take your clothes off and grease yourself in order to squeeze into your seat.

For such parkers a friend of mine keeps a supply of mock parking tickets which he affixes to the windshields of those who annoy him. The ticket reads: "This is not a parking ticket, but if it were within my power you would receive two. Because of your bullheaded, inconsiderate parking you have taken up enough room for an elephant. I sign off wishing you transmission failure (on the expressway at about 4:30 p.m.) Also -- may the fleas of a thousand camels infest your armpits."

Again, I wouldn't go that far, but I sympathize with the sentiment.

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mlive.com/kalamazoo*