

It Used To Be So Easy
By Chris Zell

What is it with people and their cars? Before I really begin this story I should explain that I don't have a car and never have. Yes, I know, I understand. I don't know how I get along without one either. No I didn't do anything to get the privilege revoked (unless you consider the time I mooned a cop on Route 1). I do it to be an ecologically responsible human. There, now do you feel like a air polluting, environmentally vacant scum? Now can I get on with the story? Thank you.

Don't get me wrong, I spend more than my share of time in cars. Its just that I don't understand the attraction. My roommate has three cars (at last count) and he's always discussing car trivia with other semi-rational people.

"Now the 1957 Ford Protruding Member, that was a car. With its. . ." And that's where I go out for coffee. I guess I can be just as, how can I put this gently, I know, stupid when discussing comedy or some other worthwhile subject,

"Now Emo's 1990 fish mounting bit, that was a joke. With its. . ."

But I don't think so.

I've thought long and hard on this subject and I think that I've come up with the reason people act like drooling lunatics when their butt is attached to their car. Its because they're the Potentate of Pedals, the Czar of Cars behind the wheel. Everything they do is perfect. No one dares question the owner of the vehicle. They are the ruling class. And some of the rules I've heard are:

"No smoking in my car."

"No touching the radio in my car."

"No rolling down the window in my car."

"No picking up all the garbage and old sweat socks in my car."

"No punching the Czar in the face and pushing him out of my car."

Its where a person is truly in control of their surroundings and they can do whatever they want. And I think this is where we run into trouble. I say this only because I care about my fellow human. We all know what happens when some people are given authority over things that can sometimes get out of control. Kinda like Quayle and his mouth.

Besides, I'm sick of seeing certain things happen all the time. And this goes way past picking of the nose. Oh stop, we're all adults here. But riddle me this, what is it about sitting behind a steering wheel that forces you, and it must be some kind of evil force, to pick your nose? I've never been on a bus and jammed my finger so far into my nose that I could adjust my vision. But

I've seen people, presumably rational human beings, try to change the channel on their thoughts while driving down the street. Do you think people can't see your elbow swing back and forth outside the drivers side window? The only explanation I can come up with is that they are omnipotent inside their rolling fiefdom.

But its pretty frightening for people outside this fiefdom. I was walking down the street and this guy was going for the gusto. I couldn't help myself and called out and he turned towards me, finger still engaged.

"Buddy, hey, you could be losing IQ points." He had the deer in headlights look on his face and a dangling particle on his digit and I know he was thinking,

'Hey, how can he see me? I am the all powerful being in my car. I'd better hurry off and get my kingdom to the royal mechanic.'

It amazes what people will do in their car. Maybe its because I don't drive, maybe people who drive are more coordinated than I am, but they seem to do more things while speeding down the street than I do while sitting in the safety of my living room. I have trouble talking on the telephone and changing the channel on the TV. I wouldn't even want to think about being in mid-morning traffic, reading the paper that's propped up on my steering wheel, talking on the phone, adjusting the radio and drinking coffee. I don't even like talking and thinking at the same time.

An old friend of mine would drive with his knees so that he could talk while he drove. It seems that he couldn't talk unless his hands were conducting his mouth and he wouldn't let the idea of hurtling down the street at high speeds stop him from verbalizing his thoughts. Its pretty unnerving to have someone look right in your face as the car ahead of you is getting closer by the second and you know that the driver hasn't seen it yet. But, at the last minute, he'd swerve past the other car (some kind of driver radar is the only thing I can think of) and, this part amazes me, yell at the other person for being a lousy driver. I've come to the conclusion that the worst driver in the world is the person directly in front of you.

And what is this stream of unconsciousness that happens the moment you start the car? I've seen people alone in their car babbling wildly. Oh Chris, you may be saying, they're probably talking on the phone. Yeah, well, what's a guy with a Yugo doing with a car phone? I mean I've had some pretty animated phone conversations but I've never glared at someone walking past me and flipped them the single bullet theory.

I was in a car with a friend and he was going off on any car that came within three feet of his prized possession or anyone who did anything that this driver felt was unusual (I should add that I live in Boston where what may be considered unusual to your habitat is scorned as mundane here. Like using other vehicles like a pinball machines bumpers and rotaries. Rotaries are little islands of land that seem indigenous to this area. The object is to race around it as close to the other contestants as possible at the highest possible speed. The first time an out of town driver experiences a rotary they think its a carnival ride and can enjoy endless hours of circular joy).

I asked my friend, after a particularly scathing rampage concerning a driver who attempted a left turn from the far right lane, if he was just keeping a running monologue to entertain me or this was his normal driving style.

"Oh, no, I do this all the time. You should hear me yell at some of these stupid drivers while driving to work." OK, it may be good to build up that stress energy before you get to work. An amazing concept.

When I asked if 1) he didn't think this was rather bizarre behavior for an adult and 2) he realized that none of the other people could hear his helpful advice, he replied:

"That's the beauty of it." Ahhh, long live the king. Maybe he'll get a stamp after he's dead.

It's just very disturbing to me, as a pedestrian, to know that people feel that they can do anything in their car. But all of this nose picking, make-up applying, map reading, phone talking, silent screaming, seven course dinner eating can be explained as something that happens to you after spending three hours at the department of motor vehicles standing in the wrong line. It changes a person, it truly does.

But what I can't understand is something I saw the other day. I was walking down a main street and there was this car splitting itself evenly down the middle of the street and the driver, if he could be considered that at this moment, was changing his t-shirt. A t-shirt! Let me explain about t-shirts. Unless you are going to rip it off your body, the best way to take it off is to pull it over your head. I may be wrong, but isn't vision and the use of hands an important thing while operating a motor vehicle?

I've changed clothes in cars before, but I was never driving and I was almost always in the back seat. But to be driving down the middle of a busy street and come to the conclusion that this is the perfect time to change your t-shirt shows some serious synapse misfirings there.

As I watched him struggle while trying to get the shirt over his head, other cars taking side streets they had no intention of taking, one thought came to mind (well, two, the first one was get the hell out of the way), you know this guy actually thinks of himself as a great driver. And a snappy dresser.

There are just so many scary things that people do with their car. I'm not even going to talk about people who park where it specifically says 'No Parking' or in handicapped zones or take up two parking spaces because their kingdom is much more important than any other kingdom (those heretics). Or car alarms. Has a car alarm ever frightened off a potential thief? I don't think so. Maybe it's given them a few chuckles, but I don't think it's ever deterred a crime. And you know that no one ever stops what they're doing and runs to find a cop when they hear an alarm. No, they say,

"Some jerks alarm's going off. What a pinhead."

And I'm definitely not going to start on sex with a moving vehicle anywhere in the vicinity. Did we learn nothing from 'The World According to Garp?'