

Westside Notes



A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step

Mindful Driving

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I have always loved cars. I enjoy design, speed and safety. In the early 80s, I honed my driving skills in Manhattan among the cabbies, delivering manuscripts for my mother. Several years ago my brother gave me a birthday gift of a day at the track with a professional race car driver; I was in heaven as my little car flew around the turns at high speeds. This was a safe place to enjoy my need for speed! As I have gotten older, I've become more safety conscious (and I want to maintain my clean driving record). One of my pet peeves is when I see people driving and texting. I notice drivers on their cell phones weaving in and out of lanes on the freeway at night when I am returning from work.

A few weeks ago my friend Cindy mentioned a piece she heard on NPR.

The author, Matt Richtel, wrote a book entitled *A Deadly Wandering: A Tale of Tragedy and Redemption in the Age of Attention*, about a young man named Reggie Shaw who hit and killed two people in 2006 while texting and driving. Shaw's case was one of the first to address the dangers of "distracted driving." Richtel explains the way technology can put "pressure" on the brain to respond. He compares the ringtones of our cell phones with being tapped on the shoulder while you are driving. It is nearly impossible for us to ignore being tapped on the shoulder and keep our attention focused on what is in front of us. The prefrontal cortex is the area of the brain responsible for emotions, processing complex thoughts and emotions. When our phone alerts us to a text or call, the prefrontal cortex hijacks (taps) the part of the brain that is focused on driving.

Shortly after listening to Richtel's piece, a colleague of mine shared that she does not use her cell phone in the car. Just to be clear, she does not talk on her cell phone (or text) while driving. I told her how busy I was and that I usually return calls on my way to work (using my headset) and on my way home. My colleague asked me if I would be able to live with myself if I injured someone as a result of distracted driving; she said she pulls over if she needs to make a call. When the universe provides me with more than one hint, I try to pay attention.

Listening to Richtel's piece on NPR helped me get honest about my own concerns about driving while talking on a cell phone, even while using ear buds. I have never sent a text while driving as I can barely see the phone. However, I have had several near misses when talking on the phone (hands-free). As someone who encourages my clients to practice mindfulness, can I really defend

the practice of driving while my mind is elsewhere? Am I really paying attention to the conversation as I dart in and out of traffic trying to make my way to the office? Would I be able to drive defensively if another driver was not paying attention?

I decided to try an experiment. I shut my phone off before getting in the car and leave it off until I arrive at my destination. The experiment has lasted a few months now and I am enjoying the “mindful ride.” After a few months, I purchased a new car with the latest handsfree/bluetooth technology. I must admit that I have been answering the phone from time to time. However, I have significantly cut down on the number of calls I make from the car. To learn more about distracted driving, check out the link to the Diane Rehm show on NPR below. I wish you a safe and mindful ride.

<http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2014-09-25/matt-richtel-deadly-wandering>