

A better driver in 6 hours

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I don't like to brag, mainly because I don't have much to brag about, but I like to think I'm an excellent driver. I base this belief on the fact that over the past three decades, I have totaled only one car and have received a mere handful of summonses costing no more than a year's worth of insurance premiums.

Now that I am of AARP age, however, I have begun to wonder if I will stop racing around like a NASCAR champion and start creeping along like a little old man, doing 20 mph with my left blinker on.

To find out, I recently took a defensive driving course. I am happy to report that I not only passed (on the left, because you are not supposed to pass on the right), but I drove the instructor crazy.

I took the class for two reasons:

1. I am cheap and therefore loved the idea that I could save 10 percent on my auto insurance.

2. I failed my last driving test. When my older daughter was 16, I took her for her driving test. Having nothing better to do, I asked the instructor if I could take the test. I did. I flunked. No kidding. The instructor, who said my daughter aced her test, let me keep my license but noted, "Most other adults would fail, too." Then he suggested that I get a good driver to give me some pointers, adding: "Why don't you ask your daughter?"

Because my daughter is out of the nest and has since developed the same driving habits that have made me a menace to society, I figured it was about time to take a refresher course.

So I signed up for a six-hour class at the Stress Free Driving School in Bohemia, N.Y. On a sunny Sunday, I sat in a tiny classroom with nine other people (including two cops) and listened as instructor Joe Valle promised to make us better drivers. I paid close attention because I was afraid one of the cops would pull me over on the way home.

Each of us was given a booklet from the National Traffic Safety Institute and had to answer questions in sections with titles such as "Why We Drive the Way We Do," "Stress and Speeders," "Selected Traffic Issues and Concerns," "Driving with Skills and Sense" and, of course, "Road Rage."

One question was: "What would you do if your brakes failed?" My answer: "Pray or wet my pants." The class thought this was an excellent response. I explained that it was exactly what happened when I totaled my car about 12 years ago. "I was approaching an intersection when my brakes failed," I said. "The other cars were stopped because an ambulance was racing through from the other direction. I had to borrow money from one of the people I hit so I could call my wife to come and get me."

Valle shook his head and continued the lesson.

When he asked us, on a scale of 1 (the worst) to 10 (the best), to rate ourselves as drivers, I gave myself an 8. "I'm really a 5," I said, "but compared to all the other idiots on the road, I deserve a good conduct medal."

Valle shook his head again. Then we discussed all the other idiots on the road, including the cretinous cowboys who routinely run the stop sign in

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front of my house. "They should all be horsewhipped," I suggested. "And their middle fingers should be surgically removed."

This brought us to road rage. Valle showed us an instructive video on the subject. It was an old Disney cartoon starring Goofy as a mild-mannered man (even though he's really a dog) who turns into a monster behind the wheel.

Valle showed us other videos, some of them pretty frightening, and discussed virtually everything it takes to be a good driver. In fact, he was terrific. He was sharp, funny and interesting. And even though we didn't go out on the road, and there was really no way to fail the class, which cost \$50, I felt at the end that I was a much better driver than I was only six hours earlier.

On the way home, I stopped at every red light, I did not exceed the speed limit, I yielded to an aggressive young idiot for whom horsewhipping would have been too good, I kept my central digit to myself, I even resisted the temptation to blow the doors off the car being driven at a snail's pace and with its left blinker on by the little old man in front of me. Best of all, I wasn't pulled over by a cop. Maybe now I can give some pointers to my daughter.