

THE ANATOMY OF A TRAGIC ROAD RAGE INCIDENT

Angry and rageful drivers are continually making clear (although not necessarily conscious at the time) choices, even though they may feel and look “completely out-of-control” to themselves and to other people involved with the road rage incident. The escalation to increased anger and destructive behavior can be rekindled by seeing the other car and then reacting to another driver’s behavior, or it can be allowed to decrease by actively making more positive choices to do things such as avoiding eye contact, intervening in negative thoughts or verbal statements that further inflame the situation, and avoiding actions designed to punish or intimidate the other driver or “to teach him (or her) a lesson.”

The intensity of road rage that occurs is determined by the controlling and entitled attitudes and the rationalizations and justifications that are used to continue to remain engaged with that other driver. The more “rounds” that antagonists go with each other, the more reasons they will find for continuing the conflict and then escalating the situation even further.

Truly understanding what happens in a road rage incident requires the willingness and the ability to analyze a road rage altercation and see its natural steps of development and escalation. To help you recognize these steps, we will analyze an actual road rage “battle” that involved three angry and aggressive drivers in which “provocation” led to “provocation,” ultimately ending in tragedy for all the participants involved in the situation.

The sequence of events listed below is reconstructed from a broadcast of a CBS news program and court records related to this case. It involves a 54-year-old retired auto worker, who was a high school valedictorian, a former member of the famed 101st Airborne, a respected Baptist church deacon, and the father of three children from Woonsocket, Rhode Island, who, as a result of the incident below, became the defendant in a criminal trial for “first degree murder with extreme cruelty and atrocity.” The deacon fits a number of the criteria related to the “Road Ranger” category discussed in another section on this website that identified the different types of road ragers that I have encountered in my work with anger and abuse over the years.

AN ACTUAL SEQUENCE OF ROAD RAGE STEPS AND CHOICES THAT ARE MADE IN THIS PARTICULAR SITUATION:

STEP 1:

On a cold dark February night in 1994, a woman on Interstate 95 in Rhode Island came up fast on another car in the far left lane that was driven by an emergency medical technician and a friend of his who were returning from work. The woman flashed the two men with her high beams to indicate to them that she wanted them to move over so she could pass them.

CHOICE POINT 1:

A female driver who was in a hurry and impatient about being “held back” in traffic decided to tailgate and flash her bright lights at the two men ahead of her to get them to move over from the far left lane and

let her go by them. Depending on the mood of the other driver, this can easily be perceived as an “affront” and “insult” that can begin the escalation process that eventually leads to a road rage incident.

STEP 2:

The two men moved over to the middle lane to let her pass but then got back into the passing lane, put their brights lights on, and followed her closely.

CHOICE POINT 2:

The male driver apparently became angry that the woman had used her bright lights to signal that she was coming up from behind and wanted to pass them. After initially moving over, he reacted by deciding to move back into the passing lane behind her to “punish” her for this action by turning on his bright lights and then commencing to follow her. This type of “punishing” or vengeful behavior is never helpful when driving; it will not be effective in altering the other driver’s behavior in the future and instead often simply escalates the other driver and the situation itself.

STEP 3:

A 54-year-old church deacon and retired auto worker was driving on this same interstate with his wife, after enjoying an afternoon of attending a dance group and an evening meal together at a Howard Johnson’s restaurant. The deacon did not like the fact that the two men were acting this way with the female driver (whom he did not know) and he moved over two lanes from where he was driving in the right lane. He then turned on his bright lights and began to closely follow the two men at high speed.

CHOICE POINT 3:

The deacon became apparently became indignant about the two men having the “audacity” to flash their bright lights and then proceed to closely follow the female driver who had flashed them with her lights. So he decided to “punish” these men by moving behind them with his bright lights on. It was later reported that he was “disgusted” by the other driver’s behavior because he didn’t like drivers “bullying” other people (although he ended up doing exactly the same thing to them that he said that he disliked in others). He apparently told his wife that he was going to “*teach the other driver a lesson.*” His clear decision to intervene “on the woman’s behalf” set the stage for the eventual deadly outcome.

STEP 4:

The deacon continued to tailgate the two men at high speed with his bright lights on for several miles.

CHOICE POINT 4:

The deacon made the choice to continue to follow the two men in order to “punish” them even further for their “transgression” against the woman driver rather than slowing down or pulling off the freeway and thereby disengaging from the power struggle that was occurring between the deacon and the two men.

STEP 5:

The two men, feeling confused and irritated themselves that they were being followed so closely by the deacon, moved over to the middle lane. The deacon then moved over to the middle lane, continuing to tailgate them at high speed, with his bright lights on, for over eight miles. The other driver, now in front

of the deacon, stopped abruptly on two occasions in heavy Sunday evening traffic to show his displeasure and irritation at being followed so closely with the deacon's bright lights on him but this probably only angered the deacon even more.

CHOICE POINT 5:

The two men made a positive choice to move out of the way of the driver behind them (unless their plan was to then tailgate him to punish him for what he had done to them, which it probably was). However, the deacon then made the choice to move over behind the two men and continue to follow them at high speed with his bright lights on them. He apparently told his wife, "*You never let an enemy get behind you,*" making a decision to view the two men he did not know as "enemies" whom he needed to vanquish in this rapidly escalating driving duel.

STEP 6:

Eventually, the emergency medical technician, exasperated by being followed in this way, said to his companion, "*I'm going to pull over and ask this guy what his problem is,*" and moved to the right shoulder of the highway, stopping his car. The deacon then immediately pulled over on the right shoulder behind the two men a few hundred feet back from them.

CHOICE POINT 6:

The second driver made the choice to pull over to the side of the road, which could have been a positive move to de-escalate the situation if the deacon had driven on and the EMT did not then continue with a chase of his own. However, the EMT saw this as an opportunity to address this situation and planned to confront this man who was following him, hoping to elicit an "explanation" about why the deacon was doing what he was doing. Pulling over the side of the road "to talk" during an escalating road rage incident is always a poor decision and can easily lead to a verbal or even a physical altercation. Sadly, in this instance, the situation was only further escalated as the deacon also stopped alongside the road, again refusing to allow the "enemy" (in his mind) to get behind him, which then contributed significantly to the fatal and tragic outcome of this incident.

STEP 7:

The two men exited their vehicle and started to walk toward the deacon's car, with the driver holding a large flashlight as he approached the deacon and his wife. The deacon also got out of his car after telling his wife, "*We've got big trouble coming down here,*" went immediately to his trunk and opened it, retrieving a crossbow from the vehicle that he owned and carried with him because he was an "avid archery buff."

CHOICE POINT 7:

The two men made the decision to leave their vehicle (always a poor decision with other angry drivers) and walk toward the deacon's car, with the EMT holding a "large flashlight," which the deacon could have easily perceived to be a "weapon" that the EMT planned to use on the deacon (and possibly his wife). The deacon, feeling threatened by the two "*bigger and younger men,*" (as he reported later) responded by choosing to seek out a weapon of his own, the crossbow he stored in the trunk of his car which he used for target shooting and for "protection" in his car. Carrying a baseball bat, a wrench, a screwdriver, a hammer, a golf club, a knife, a gun, a crossbow, or any other "weapon" for "personal protection" in the car (just in case "something bad happens") is another poor decision that often contributes to further escalation and actual road rage incidents. The person who carries the "weapon" is

“primed” to engage with someone whom he or she perceives to be threatening or disrespectful to him or her.

STEP 8:

The deacon warned the two men to “*Hold it right there*” and told them, “*You’d better go back to your car.*” The other driver, according to the deacon, screamed, “*What’s your problem, you fucking asshole?*” (although the EMT’s friend stated that the EMT never uttered those inflammatory words to the deacon).

CHOICE POINT 8:

The deacon made the decision to escalate the situation with his words at this point by trying to assume control over the two men and demanding that they follow his instructions. The EMT may or may not have escalated the situation further by cursing at the deacon but, in any case, the two men in the second vehicle made the decision to continue to walk toward the deacon and his car, another poor decision on their part.

STEP 9:

The two men walked up to the deacon, not heeding his demand that they “stop.” and return to their vehicle. When they got close to the deacon, the other driver reached for the crossbow, at which time it “went off,” with the arrow striking the other driver in his chest. The arrow had an expanding broadhead point, where the razor-sharp blades “fly open” when they hit the intended “target” (the arrows are designed to cause as much damage and bleeding as possible to the “prey”). The EMT gasped to his friend, “*He shot me,*” and then fell to the ground. The deacon later claimed that the crossbow had “discharged accidentally” and stated that he never intended to actually fire the crossbow at the men.

CHOICE POINT 9:

The deacon, who stated afterward that he had been feeling “threatened” by the two younger and bigger men, then made the decision to aim the crossbow directly at one of the oncoming men, creating a potentially life-threatening situation. The EMT apparently grabbed at the crossbow, another poor decision in this situation.

STEP 10:

The deacon drove away from the scene and was picked up by the police at a later time. The friend of the EMT had noted and memorized the deacon’s license plate number. He drove his friend to the hospital and second driver was then flown to a medical center in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he died from the wound he had suffered at the hands of the deacon’s crossbow.

CHOICE POINT 10:

The two parties finally make the decision to end this horrific road rage incident as the deacon gets back into his car after shooting the EMT and speeds away. The EMT’s friend takes him to the car after noting the deacon’s license plate number and drives his friend to the hospital and then contacts the police. Calling 911 during a road rage incident is always a positive choice (as is getting the license number and make and model of the car, if at all possible). Unfortunately, in this situation, the police were notified much too late to effectively intervene in the murder that had just occurred.

THE AFTERMATH: THE TRIAL AND THE EVENTUAL VERDICT

The deacon was found guilty of first degree murder “with extreme cruelty and atrocity” and given a life sentence in prison with no possibility of parole, which he is currently serving at the Cedar Junction Massachusetts State Prison. He continued to insist that he was only defending himself against “*two bigger and younger men.*” He argued that he was not responsible and blameless and stated, “***I will not apologize for defending my wife and defending my own life; I’m not going to apologize for doing the right thing; I did nothing wrong.***” After the verdict, his wife, whom he had vowed to protect in this road rage incident, filed for divorce. The deacon had no prior history of problems with the law nor were any other significant anger issues reported or acknowledged in his life up to that time.