BUMPER TO BUMPER WITH MANKIND

BY RON S. MILLER

"pity this busy monster, manunkind,
not. Progress is a comfortable disease . . ." *

I AM TIRED of hearing people complaining that they don't know where modern civilization is going. I know where modern civilization is going. It's going to Pasadena. And, eight to ten, it's taking the freeway!

If there is any anthropologist who is dissatisfied with his data, I suggest he sharpen several hundred of his best pencils and set up laboratory on the nearest interchange about five o'clock tomorrow. There he may observe humanity rushing to an obscure somewhere, soul-naked, sharing petrol and profanity in that one universal desire of all freeway humanity: to get the hell off!

On second thought, I not only suggest such a study, I *urge* it. It would be not merely enlightening, but downright invaluable! Just imagine yourself in the midst of one of those unique freeway problems, such as having somehow entered the freeway from an off-ramp. There sit you, solitary, unaided, confronted by the roaring approach of several hundred incredibly stubborn vehicles. You evaluate the situation immediately, with the results set forth here:

1. Those who approach you represent an opposition.
2. Experience has taught you that you must face all opposition undaunted.
3. Unfortunately, experience has also taught this to the opposition.
4. A quick count tells you you're outnumbered.
5. Perplexity sets in.

Now, let's say a study like the one I'm urging has been made, and the results published in "Dr. Huzzah's Handbook of Freeway Psychology." In such a circumstance, you need merely reach into your glove compartment, pull out your copy of "Dr. Huzzah's Handbook of Freeway Psychology," look in the index under "Entering Freeway From Wrong Direction at Unadvantageous Time," turn to the correct

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page, and follow the fully documented and intricately illustrated suggestions. What a boon!

Because there's never been such a study (and no sign of one forthcoming), I've had to conduct a little investigation of my own. It's not an elaborate investigation. Just a few notes. And I must admit that I've been motivated, not by scholarship, but by that quaint instinct, survival. You see, I'm dilemma-prone. That is, if there's a freeway perplexity or frustration by which I haven't been threatened, I'll run into it tomorrow. So I take notes. It gives me a little security, knowing there's a predicament I can refer to.

Realizing there are others of my ilk, others who are periodically confounded in their bumper to bumper excursions into this transient madness, I should like to take this opportunity to share with them a few of my more important findings, humbly hoping they will prove of some immediate value, and—who knows?—perhaps also an incentive for future work in the field.

Before getting too deeply involved, it may be helpful to observe that freeways are not used: they are endured. For this reason, no individual should be discouraged from a study of yoga, although I strongly advise against contemplation of the navel while in transit. Even more valuable than yoga, however, would be a little understanding of people.

To prove this to the doubters, let me dally no further with prefaces.

On a fine April evening I had struck out upon the freeway with the confidence of a man who knows exactly where he's going. So rarely do I contain such confidence that I was tempted to leap upon the hood of my car and shout it to all the world. "Look at me," I wanted to tell them. "I know exactly where I'm going! *Exactly*, world! To Anaheim, California, that's where I'm going. Yessiree!"

The traffic was heavier than I'd previously encountered. In fact, I've since been informed that at the time (it's nearly three years now) there wasn't a single instrument capable of measuring the almost imperceptible distances between bumpers (although I'm assured one is presently being developed at Princeton, which is an indication that *somebody* is taking an interest). I knew that in one mile I'd have to turn right from the freeway I was presently traveling, onto the freeway leading to the village of Anaheim. Now, even the most unworldly driver knows a right turn requires being unequivocally in a right lane. I was unequivocally in a left lane. One mile from the turnoff I began a truly valiant effort to switch.

DON LIDIKAY/UNION PACIFIC PHOTOS

Let's skip the details of my frustration, and say only that in the heart of a traffic I couldn't escape, I found myself headed, not merely in a wrong direction for my destination, but in the opposite direction!

The following evening my schedule made no demands that I attempt journey to Anaheim, but the challenge was there. And this time I was prepared.

I traveled in the lane immedately adjoining the right lane (for traffic in the right lane was nearly at a standstill). Exhilarated, and with the experience of the previous evening under my safety belt, I sped confidently forward at my allotted 20 miles per.

This time I began attempting the switch *two miles* before the turnoff. With this head start, plus being but one lane away, plus my past experience, I was certain all the odds were in my favor. Ah, the folly of certainty! Helplessly, pleadingly, for the second time, I saw my turnoff disappearing behind, at 20 miles per and one lane to my right, with the relentless quality of a nightmare.

Now I was hopelessly entangled. The challenge was becoming an obsession, and over the next several weeks (although I carefully avoided further involvements with the freeway) I became more and more convinced that a lane switch in bumper to bumper traffic *could* be accomplished. It was simply a matter of finding the key.

The solution came accidentally on a memorable Friday evening I dropped my bowling ball on Irving Ludmark's toe. This was a new experience for me, as had been the turnoff, but automatically I looked, with deep concern, straight into Irving's eye and said, "Gee, I'm sorry." Noticing my desperation and embarrassment, he attempted a smile through his grimace, and replied bravely, "That's all right, buddy. It's only pain."

There was my answer!

The following Monday evening I was again on the freeway. I felt like Plato stepping from the cave and Galileo on the leaning tower and Chrysler showing a profit, all at once. How shall I explain my discovery? It's quite simple. You see, I finally realized that people, even when they're in cars and their cars are on the freeway, must have *feelings*. That is, they *can* have feelings, but someone's got to stimulate them. Someone must, in essence, drop a bowling ball on their toe and then apologize. See?

My method was simple. I concentrated on catching the eye of some driver in the lane adjoining. But somehow each one knew what I was after, and, sensing the bowling ball hovering precariously over his toes, used every possible skill to avoid looking at me. At last, one poor soul glanced my way. He was probably just working a kink out of his neck, but there he was, caught by my eye, trapped! It must have constituted a terrible failure for him. And rather than jeopardize his conscience—through dinner, bedtime, and perhaps all of the following day—with recurring images of my carefully rehearsed pleading expression, he braced himself against the sudden symphony of horns blaring criticism of the gap he was permitting between his car and the one ahead, and motioned me entrance. I had succeeded!

Although this was my first bright horizon on the dull terrain of the freeway, I don't want to mislead anyone into thinking that the eye-of-conscience technique (as I've come to call it) is infallible. As a matter of fact, I've discovered, since that time, the existence of a strange little species on which the technique doesn't work at all: The Invulnerables.

The Invulnerables share only one common trait: total immunity to any sensation of guilt. Those Iagos of the freeway are so immune that I'm really tempted to advise the average driver against tangling with them. But, knowing there are always those of the indefatigable spirit, I'll describe a few of the more common types, together with *possible* (for these are unpredictable creatures) alternative techniques. I quote directly from my notes:

The Defiant Invulnerable

Description: Small man with small mustache in very large car.

Explanation: Only one encounter (June 7), but have a hunch this guy's afraid of me and bought his car to prove it. Now it's like he's on a campaign to assert his equality. Possible alternative technique: Pulled alongside his monster, asked with all the sincerity at my command, "Hey, sir! 500 horsepower?" He smiled back, "No, only 450," and proved it by halting traffic and permitting me entrance. Use this again!

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BUMPER TO BUMPER

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THE UNWITTING INVULNERABLE

Description: Anyone in teeny car.

Explanation: Exhibits intense indifference as he proudly maneuvers his VW or Isetta among us giants. But I don't think indifference is intentional. Seems more a matter of position, for, because I'm not in a similar vehicle, he can't see me. His roof's in the way.

Possible alternative technique: On July 10 I was completely stopped in jammed traffic, so simply opened my door, stooped down, and asked him for right of way. Got it.

THE CIRCUMSTANCE INVULNERABLE

Description: Anyone with pained expression and bulging eyes in any car.

Explanation: Several reasons for contorted expression. Most common, I think, is failure on the individual's part to acknowledge —before entering into this unalterable delay —a simple obligation to his bladder.

Possible alternative technique: None, and don't try. There's nothing going to keep this guy from his concentrated determination to leave the freeway.

All this should prove that (as I suggested earlier) an understanding of people really helps solve in-transit problems in the freeway imbroglio. I heartily recommend cultivating this faculty.

But I must warn that, unfortunately, the use of people-understanding is strictly limited to in-transit problems. The non-transit, or motionless, freeway situation requires an altogether different kind of understanding.

No sooner had I developed my eye-of-conscience technique, and consequently discovered The Invulnerables, than I found myself in the midst of one of these terrifying non-transit situations.

I had, for the first time, entered the freeway near the interchange at 5:00. Previously, I'd experienced entering at 4:58 and 5:03, but never at precisely 5:00. During my 4:58 entrance, I was able to wheel almost two-thirds of the way through the interchange, and during my 5:03 entrance I was so long delayed at the on-ramp that I was emotionally prepared for the infinitesimal pace of the freeway proper.

But in my 5:00 entrance, I sped without obstacle up the ramp, swung hopefully onto the freeway, and stopped! It was as though the uninhabited ramp had made me a great promise and the freeway had refused to fulfill it. So there I sat, without benefit of on-ramp preparation, bounded on all sides by a maddeningly motionless traffic.

Being a pretty stable fellow, I might—as I've since been assured by several authorities—easily have adjusted to such a simple frustration. But no! It is impossible for me to encounter one frustration without immediately encountering another. And there it was, looming before me. A huge sign that commanded in painfully clear letters:

DO NOT EXCEED 55 MILES PER HOUR! My adjustment burst out of all normal proportions.

Frantic, I rolled up my windows and began singing erotic folk songs. In all previous unbearable situations, erotic folk songs had served me quite well. But this was something bigger, and erotic folk songs soon proved inadequate.

In sheer desperation, I flipped on the radio. Music! I tried drowning myself in a cha-cha version of "My Love Has Guts," but no sooner had five bars been played than a drooly little voice broke in: "This is Mick Mumser spinning the hits on the Freeway Fraternity. And here's a special bulletin. All traffic on the in-bound San Bernardino Freeway is at a complete standstill. City Police Department advises using alternate routes. Remember, for all the up-to-the-minute reports, stay tuned to . . ."

Plunging one of my new loafers through the speaker brought me further temporary relief, but eventually I was forced to return to my erotic folk songs.

Somehow I pulled through, though I'll never really know how. Some have credited it to my stable nature, others to the medicinal qualities of unexpurgated "Frankie & Johnny," but no one knows for certain. In any event, the sign was out of sight in just less than an hour and I could still recite my name and address (which I did several times for self-assurance).

Unlike the in-transit problems, this sort has no solution. At first I thought of petitioning the city to hang drapes over all speed signs and draw them during these motionless periods. But later I soberly realized that everyone would probably remember what was underneath, and become even more distraught.

There's only one real solution and that's to keep unstable persons off the freeway. This may sound a bit radical, but in view of the stamina, ingenuity and courage necessary for adjusting to speed signs in motionless traffic, consideration of such a solution is almost unavoidable.

I should like to cite a case in point, concerning the prominent Edgar A. Shadwell, the famous poet and spokesman for the Knocked-Down Generation.

A lover of nature, Shadwell awoke very early one spring morning with the sudden desire to spend his weekend in the slums. Slipping into his official turtleneck, he ran trippingly out to his stripped Bentley (the Knocked-Downs, you'll recall, hate extravagance) and roared innocently off towards the freeway.

Having never driven the freeway before, Shadwell was probably not without some misgivings. But, entering cautiously several miles from the interchange and finding the great road uncrowded, he took a deep breath and ground into high gear.

It was not until he was near the interchange and the traffic had begun to congest that he remembered—in one terrible moment —that he had forgotten his espresso canteen! There was no choice. His security was shattered. He had to turn back!

The experience proved traumatic. He was overcome by an uncontrollable trembling. Somehow he maneuvered (although he still can't recollect how) into a right lane. Once there, he edged nervously along until he reached an off-ramp.

But it was one of those off-ramps that go on and on, twisting and turning, doubling back on itself, and, the end never in sight, twisting and turning some more. In a state of near-collapse, Shadwell was forced to pull off to the side after his second turn.

No one knows exactly how many hours

Shadwell waited to be rescued, but it must have been a good many, because in the interim, in order to pacify himself, he composed his greatest masterpiece, the now famous epic "Lost on a Dark Off-Ramp."

In order to prove beyond question how traumatic the freeway experience can be for certain persons, I should like to quote from the last canto of this work. Shadwell begins the canto with a haunting chant (the much quoted "Damn, I don't know where I am") and then proceeds to an intricate metaphorical development in which he assumes the identity of Uncle Wiggily. Immediately after this comes his most profound statement:

". . . I have seen the finest minds of my generation
Pledging vassalge to hope,
Fall lilliput within those gargantuan veins
And clot into insignificance!
And now I too have fallen,
Not *on* the freeway, nor *off* the freeway,
But somewhere in between!
Do I grow old? Do I grow old?
Shall I drive my Bentley with the windows rolled?"

But it's not until a few passages later that the effects of the trauma begin to show. In a series of full-color hallucinations, he describes encounters with Homer, Socrates, Thomas Aquinas, and Irving Berlin. Finally he gets into a discussion with the brilliant Dante who urges him to call his girl friend, Sheila. This he does in the canto's loveliest passage:

". . . I believe this is Hell, my dearest,
So we shall be immortal.
Though the Sun breed vapor lock on the freeway,
You shall remain in your natural state,
Suspended forever in cosmic formaldehyde,
Mine!
So seek me and find me on this ramp I abhor.
Oh, thank heavens for your 36-23-34!"

It was here that Shadwell reportedly laid down his pencil and fell into the final stages of shock. The freeway had taken its toll.

But Shadwell was lucky. He was discovered later that day by gypsies, and, on a grant from the Ford Foundation, flown immediately to Paris to recuperate. He is still in Room 8 upstairs from the Baudelaire Bar.

It's comforting to know that "Lost on a Dark Off-Ramp" is being widely read today. Perhaps that means that the problems of the freeway are not going unrecognized. But neither a poet like Shadwell nor a layman like myself (despite my development of the eye-of-conscience and the resulting discovery of The Invulnerables) can hope to compete with a legitimate study of the freeway phenomenon. Hence, it is my fondest hope that my notes and Shadwell's epic may someday combine to stimulate a full-fledged investigation by qualified specialists in this field.

Who knows what they might uncover? Perhaps a method for flawless freeway driving, perhaps an insight into the mysterious nature of man, or perhaps even the key to the universe!

But even if they uncover nothing, it will have certainly been a nice gesture.