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In the Moment

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I have a theory. It isn't scientifically proven, but I have seen the results so often, I struggle to believe it isn't true—at least for some of us. And it goes something like this.

In our brains, I think there is this vein or channel known as the dumb pathway. It is fed by veins that include ingredients like logic, reason, consequence, experience, fun, ignorance, entertainment, and stupidity. Each of these ingredients enters the mix in varying amounts, depending on the size of the vessel carrying it. At a very young age, the largest of these veins is ignorance, which feeds the dumb pathway, but no one is at fault. "Don't touch the stove; it is hot," means nothing to a two-year-old until she burns her hand, whereupon the experience vein starts to grow to add a larger dose to decision-making.

As people age, all these veins grow or shrink. A ten-year-old male with a cigarette lighter hasn't yet developed logic, reason, or consequence veins, but the fun, entertainment, and stupidity veins have grown enormous—with stupidity leading the pack. By 18, the same male with a vehicle is not aware that these veins have been shrinking—experience has been squeezing them out—even though he's doing 140 mph on Hwy 20 between Alden and Pasaide to get home before curfew, and attempting to outrun the cops is like a burst aneurism in the stupidity vein, and the six-month license suspension is causing that same stupidity vein to shrink even more. So, by the time some of us hit our sunset years, logic, experience, and consequence rule our lives while the rest have atrophied from lack of use. We have become the most insulting of all adult words: careful. Fun? Entertainment? Ha. Sledding down a hill with our grandchildren after an ice storm has us laid up for two weeks thinking about hot baths, heating pads, and a cane: Stupid? Not if we can help it. We know better, so we have shut that stupidity vein down.

However, nothing is ever quite as precise as we would like to believe, and sometimes that stupidity vein revives just long enough to have us reflecting on ourselves and somewhat frightened by what we have not learned. Typically, these include things like turning on the grill with the lid down, and when it does not ignite, flipping it open and pulling out the lighter. Propane pools, and the first time that lighter sparks, our knuckles, eyebrows, and hair—poof—all curl up with that distinctive burnt-hair smell, and we get our wife's best attempt at hair stylist late on a Saturday night so we can sit in church on Sunday morning looking semi-respectable. Now we don't open the lid when we flick the lighter, so it explodes just a little with the flame only licking off the hair on our lighter finger, while the voice shouting in the background reminds us of the past. The vein continues to shrink but it's not gone....

When I texted my wife that I had high-centered the Expedition in a snowbank while she was sitting beside a pool in Florida, the return text was, "Sounds like old times."

I come from a culture of tow-ers: people with a chain or tow rope tucked away in a back corner of every vehicle, waiting for the opportunity to drag someone—anyone—out of a ditch, snow bank, median—whatever has rendered them immobile.

I suppose this singular education came from the tractors that were part of our farm. The D Case had a crank permanently mounted up front, the only key in a time we no longer remember, and the John Deere had a crank hole—and a holder on the tractor where the crank was stored. The steel handle was shiny from use. Batteries were installed on the tractors with a nod toward the future, but more typically a monument to

what technology couldn't do than could. By age seven, we'd learned how to keep our hand open without wrapping our thumbs around that crank to keep from breaking them if the tractor kicked.

We'd also learned that our tractors were never guaranteed to start, so we parked them on a hill—drove to the top and stopped with the front wheels pointing down and killed the engines while leaving them in second gear. The key was to stop precisely at the tipping point and ensure second gear was holding.

Notice that no mention of brakes or parking brakes is included. Philosophically speaking, brakes may have been an imposition on our dreams as farmers. The closest acknowledgment to slowing down was sunset because no one dreamed of working a tractor without lights at night. There was no stopping, no holding back, no restriction—just full speed ahead.

The truth is simpler and less philosophical—who needs brakes? These are tractors, so ours didn't. Need to stop? Ditch it, as in ride it into the ditch and back out once it stops. More importantly, plan ahead. Look ahead. Think.

In all of this comes the singular education of towing. The next time the tractor was needed, you went out to the hill, hopped up on the beast, turned on the switch, pulled the choke, gave it fuel, and, depending on the tractor, either depressed the clutch pedal with your foot or pulled the lever for the hand clutch. As it gained momentum down the hill, you dumped the clutch, and if the tractor was behaving, it coughed, sputtered, and then came to life and took off around the corner, leaving you frantically cutting the fuel before you launched into the ditch. However, dumping the clutch too early meant the tractor lost momentum and wasn't going anywhere. Here is where towing begins.

Having at least one vehicle on the place that was guaranteed to run was critical, so if you screwed up, someone else would get that vehicle while the dough-head who didn't get it went to get the tow cable. For the most part, it took very little to fire up the tractor, but early in our experiences, too much throttle had the 30-foot cable sling-shotting it around the pickup like a water skier on a corner—without brakes. We improved through necessity.

The theme of towing continued into our early driving experiences. In teenage years when school was cancelled due to snow, while most students would take the opportunity to drive to town to shop, my brother and I would take our VW Beetles to jump snow drifts—with a chain in the trunk. Now Bugs have what is called a floor pan instead of a frame. In deep snow, this pan functions more like a sled and tends to lift the wheels off the ground and high-center it—a little like a Dachshund in snow. The only way to get it mobile is to dig out the snow with a long-handled shovel or throw a line on it. We would space ourselves far enough apart so that if the first car got stuck, the second would be able to free it up—sometimes entertainment is hard to come by in the backwoods of Ontario.

The last time I was dragged any distance was 1980 outside of Wawa, Ontario—up north in Western Ontario where moose-crossing signs are as familiar as no-parking signs in the Toronto. Highway 1—aka Trans Canada—is the only road that runs the entire country, and in that area, it was a two-lane road sparsely traveled in October. I had been driving for 20 hours when suddenly my Bug just quit. Dummy lights came on, and nothing. Immediately I pushed in the clutch while the Bug was coasting and dumped it because, inherently, I know how to bump-start a car, thanks to my youth. It didn't fire. Nothing.

It quietly rolls to a stop and I sit there on the side of the road, too buzzed to think. After a few minutes of checking the obvious—yes, I have enough fuel; no, the key did not mystically short out—I get out of the car and open the hood. I grab the fan belt—the single most important item on this air-cooled engine—and I rotate it. The engine moves, so I know it is not seized. And it does not smell hot—the scent of death for Bug engines. This is a good sign. But I've got nothing, and other than the possible presence of moose, wolves, bears, and beavers, this section of road is deserted. I don't recall seeing a house, and cell phones did not exist. A half hour later, the Bug is still sitting on the side of the road with the hood up and me with my thumb out looking to hitch a ride back into town when a forestry truck stops. The driver winds down his window and asks, "Where you headed?"

"Wawa" I tell him.

He looks me up and down and says, "You're

going in the wrong direction, eh?" and drives off. I stand there watching the truck get swallowed by the bush, retract my thumb, and slowly walk to the other side of the road to contemplate my disorientation. About 10 minutes later the same truck shows up, pulls in front of the Bug, and hands me his tow rope. I tie it onto his hitch and my bumper, and he drags me into town, where three hours later I am once again mobile.

After that I graduated to the world of tow bars, and often the vehicle being pulled was a Bug. A particularly abused Bug I owned put more miles on a tow bar than it ever did being driven. But it functioned as a particularly unique trailer, I suppose, in all my moves. Another one trailing behind me came into service when the clutch fan on the Ryder truck decided it didn't like the heat outside of Park City, Utah. Unhitching the Bug, one of us drove it up the hill that the truck refused to climb, and the other followed in the truck behind, pouting and sulking at the comeuppance of that car.

Somewhere in the middle of my travels, a friend who owned a welding business made me a tow bar. Up until that point I had made tow bars to custom-fit my Bugs, and they were not what most would call safe. Sure, they bolted up and we got from point A to point B, but my guardian angel must have done overtime. When Howard saw that setup, he took me to his shop and crafted a work of art. A road grader blade and ¼-inch channel steel had the bar at about 100 lbs, but it was not going to bend or break. And nothing was going to come loose. That was in 1986.

Through time and experience, I would like to believe we get smarter, but that isn't always the case. Independence gets in the way, and we believe by sheer determination we can do something now that we did at an earlier age. The real problem is we now weigh all the possible outcomes where once we just did it because we didn't believe there could be any outcome except the one we expected. The stupidity vein has atrophied but still exists. The vehicle was a 2004 Expedition, and I made the mistake of answering my phone.

"Hi," a bright female voice sparkled into the phone. "Um, ah, Kathy told me you might be able to help me," she sounded young and hesitant and definitely unrecognizable.

"Okaaay. Kathy who, and what can I help you with?" I responded. We established mutual acquaintances, and I came to find out that she was having problems with her Expedition and wanted to get rid of it.

Being cheap, I always opt for repairs first, if possible, so when I began to ask her what was wrong and whom she wanted me to bring it to, she cut me off and told me she already had another vehicle and wondered if I would know anyone who might want it. Sometimes I feel like a horse trader because this happens more often than I would like to admit. The phone rings and someone says, "Say Bill, you know anyone looking for a car?" Or, "Say Bill, I am looking for a car. Know anyone with anything?"

Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. Often those calling are either looking for something really cheap or selling something with high miles and know they won't get much money for it and hope to do better privately. I am always nervous for fear of the car being a lemon and I am the one in the middle.

I tell her I will check around and immediately go to the closest thing I have to family in this town: two guys that drink motor oil for breakfast and smoke tires after supper. They live in the world of cars, and when I ask them, Harv squints at me through a cloud of cigarette smoke and mumbles, "We don't get much call for Expedition parts. Can't give you more than $100.00 for it."

I tell him thanks and get back to her with that news. She doesn't seem to care, but it bothers me. Surely a vehicle worth $42,000.00 in 2004 has to be worth more than 100 bucks. And that is my first mistake. I ask her for the keys, and when they arrive, I get in and start it up. "Runs smooth. No typical Ford rapping or ticking on startup, no dummy lights on; everything seems to work," I think. I tell her I will buy it, and she iss relieved to have it gone. "I don't want it, but someone will," I imagine. However, I don't' drive it because there are no plates on it, and I am old enough not to take those chances anymore. Experience does have value.

Later that week when I have time, I start it again and conduct a more thorough inspection. Everything seems to check out—until I step on the brake pedal. It feels a little slushy, and about

the third time I depress it, the pedal slowly sinks to the floor—not an unfamiliar feeling to me. As owner to perhaps as many as 35 vehicles in my life and perhaps seven of them truly road worthy, I have experienced that sinking feeling far more times than I prefer. However, the upside to this scenario is that the vehicle is peaceably idling in Park in a parking lot, not coming down the Escarpment above St. Catharine's with a dropped shift, the air brake warning-light frantically blinking, and the buzzer sounding like a 5-alarm fire where I bounce the Louisville over the curb into a field to avoid the red light and the cross traffic that look like tin ducks in the shooting gallery at the fair.

I depress the pedal several more times, and then the brake warning-light leers on the dash. For those wondering, the color of dash lights is something of a psychological orientation. Yellow means sort of—whatever—like the low-tire light we now have because we aren't smart enough to gauge whether our tires are low; orange means start thinking about it, like a suggestion, and red means don't even think about it—like a command. Stop now. The light is definitely red.

I get out of the vehicle and down on my hands and knees in the snow to see fluid dripping from the left front corner of the vehicle to form a puddle. "Great," I mutter, "a brake line." Brake lines are given to corroding in road-salted climates, and a look at the undercarriage assures me this vehicle has spent its life in salt baths. All of the brake lines, along with most of the rest of the undercarriage, sport that scaley-rust, flakey complexion. What happens is that corrosion eats at the line, and over time the hydraulic pressure of the oil inside the line presses through the rust-thinned walls, and a pin-hole leak develops.

In Iowa, January is a bitter month—perhaps the bitterest. Christmas is over, and typically the weather behaves long enough for relatives to return home for the holiday and then sneak out before the cold settles in—at least that is what all involved hope. But after that brief respite, the state gets its pound of flesh for whatever pleasure is enjoyed with family, and the temperature plummets. This year is no different. At 20 below, my wife tells me, "I am going to Florida to sit by a pool." I tell her, "I am going to work." And in the middle of all this, a vehicle with no brakes sits in a public parking lot, and it needs to go to a garage. I do not fix vehicles outside at 20 below unless stranded on the side of the road an hour from everywhere with no other choice. Frostbite on three fingers and one ear taught me that lesson.

The struggle with moving the Expedition is *no brakes*. "Use the emergency brake," some might think. Rust also corrodes emergency-brake cables, and when used for the first time in several years—or decades—they have a tendency to seize up, which means the driver must crawl under the back end of the vehicle and cut the emergency brake cables with a side cutter in an attempt to free them. I rule them out, so I also rule out putting a chain on the vehicle and dragging it across town. Rolling will not be a problem. Not hitting the vehicle pulling me, or worse yet, pushing it through a stop light across a busy highway will be. But rather than calling a towing service to flat-deck it to a garage, I decide to tow-bar it instead. After all, I still have my military-grade tow bar that hasn't seen use in 25 years and three moves. I just need to adapt it to the Expedition.

Thinking about it after the fact, I see that everything would have been okay if I had been able to drive the vehicle a little so that I knew its quirks, but *no brakes* does not provide options, so I was, as is said, "left to my own devices."

I take the grinder to the tow bar and change the channels for connecting it, make adapter brackets to attach to the vehicle, and on a frigid Saturday morning, just after dawn, I install the tow bar and connect it to my pickup.

Now, I don't know if it is the temperature of 20 below or the stiffness of the steering knuckle—a known flaw on those vehicles—but shortly after I attempt to pull the vehicle around a corner, I hear a snap and everything goes kittywampus. I stop. A quick look shows me my military-grade tow-bar connector has failed. I have been hauling that anchor with me from 1986, and now in my moment of need, it breaks? Seriously? Now what?

Contrary to what many who believe they know me might think, I always have a backup plan when it comes to vehicles. For most of my adult life I have traveled with a toolbox in my car, as important as, or maybe more so than, my

suitcase. A long time ago my wife stopped asking about that. To this day, I have a hydraulic floorjack in the back of my vehicle so I don't have to fight with cheap, flimsy axle jacks in the event of a flat tire. I read up on all known flaws of my vehicles and replace the parts before they fail so that I'm not jammed in a bad situation. And sadly, I still have a backup vehicle in the driveway in the event that one of them takes ill. I am sure there is a clinical diagnosis for my behavior, but I sleep better at night with these assurances.

However, when I hear the snap of the steel and I see the Expedition veer to the left, I realize that I have not considered the tow bar breaking, and I do a bad, bad thing. I revert back to a time and place I haven't been in a long, long time. I disconnect the tow bar, park the truck, and get in the Expedition. In a second's time I decide to drive it to the garage—a really dumb idea, not realizing how dumb it is until I am in so deep, as Shakespeare would say, "to go back is as tedious as to go o'er." If I had been paying close attention, I would have felt the stupidity vein deluging my brain.

Referential justification may not be a clinical term, but it serves me well in the moment. Shoot, I had been doing this early in life on a regular basis. What is so different now? Well, the differences I neglect to consider are things like being in a town instead of out in the country or the possibility of running into not only someone's car but perhaps an ambitious although misguided jogger running at 20 below zero. Or rolling through a stop light onto a state highway with oncoming traffic that is not expecting a vehicle to roll through because green means go and red means stop and they clearly have the green light and I clearly have the red. These realizations only materialize once I have left the parking lot.

Like I said, the vehicle runs well; the transmission is smooth; the defroster has cleared the windshield. The only problem is stopping, so I begin to work the transmission. If I don't drive over 10 mph and I drop the transmission into low, my Expedition will slow down almost to a stop. Certainly it takes some distance, but eventually this occurs. If I hit someone at that speed, it will only be a few thousand in repairs as opposed to writing off their vehicle.

I coast to the first stop sign and put it in neutral for the last 10 feet. We crunch to a stop with the snow creating resistance. I begin to feel good. The Expedition creeps around that corner and we are on a straight run—more like crawl—to the stop light.

Now small towns have few stop lights because mostly they are not needed, but the reason they exist is because of the volume of traffic traveling the crossroads and the inability to enter intersections without some sort of intervention. The stoplight in my windshield is a major concern because it controls a state highway that runs through the town, and I am traveling the road that intersects that state highway.

Typically, the light gives preference to the highway, but for the benefit of those turning left, there is a token amount of time for four to five cars to get through if the drivers are paying attention. Although no other cars are out this early, I must have been car seven or eight. From a distance I lurk, watching my light change from green to red, and like a cat stalking a mouse, as I creep closer. It turns green, and I make a run for it.

Now, making a run for it means speeding up to 20 mph—a decent speed for a vehicle with a red brake light illuminating the dash, but not nearly fast enough to close the distance in time. I hope I am going to make it, but it doesn't take long to realize that it is not going to happen, and I say to myself, " Self, hope is not a strategy," and frantically drop the gearshift into low. However, the automotive engineers have decided that at 20 mph, it should not go into low, so the transmission over-rides the gear selector and instead erupts with horribly derisive sounds. To appease it, I have to bump it up to 2nd with no reduction in speed and a red light glaring at me. It is now happy, and I am freaked.

But instincts kick in, and just like 1977, in front of Arnie Koekkoek's house, in my '68 Volkswagen Beetle when the gas pedal went to the floor because the carburetor froze open on that same patch of road, I pull hard to the right and high-center the Expedition on a snow bank. But rather than coming to the expected abrupt halt, the all-wheel drive plows on through. I run the curb and turn right onto the highway just as if I might have planned it, with the glow of a red stoplight glaring at me.

However, at this precise moment, an unsuspecting semi loaded with hogs enters the inter-

section doing the speed limit, and the blast of his air horn rattles my windows as he veers to the left. I raise my hand in a helpless gesture, and he reciprocates, his arm out the window with a single finger salute. I have heard that truckers running the highway hate driving through this town, and I apologize for contributing to the animosity.

I am shaking, but I feel pretty good about not getting killed by a semi-load of hogs, and after a bit, I manage to turn left into a parking lot to get off the highway. Taking a moment to calm down, I scan the route ahead of me. As the crow flies, it consists of a median and a sidewalk with snow piled on both sides. Yes, I have become a crow. Given my most recent foray, I avoid the highway with a necessary left turn and instead back up and take a run at these, jumping both median and sidewalk, and get back on the side road, the destination not in sight but closer. One stop sign and one left turn to go.

I am now back to 10 mph. There are no cars, but there is no gravitas either. Smugness dissipated with the blast of that airhorn, and creeping along at this speed, I want to sink down with my eyes barely peering over the dash, a cap on my head, imitating a population that drives at this speed—summer or winter. While I have been frustrated in the past, I am delighted to pose as one of them as I idle along. The Expedition can smell the open road and strains to open up, expedite, taken an expedition, do something to honor its name, but the gear selector says "Low," and I am not moving it.

The next stop sign has no drama. This is a T intersection, and I am on the right road of the T to be able to crawl to a stop without looking for a place to ditch it. Again, the plows have not been out, and the snow creates a barrier, so I get assistance even as I worry about the police and a rolling stop. At this point I am wondering how I will stop if I get pulled over, never mind explaining no license plates, no insurance, no brakes….

The last block, then a left turn into the garage lot. No cars, no one awake, too cold to be outside. I park it and let out a breath. The vehicle sits there quietly idling, just a simple drive to a shop while the sweat pours from me. My shirt is soaked, my palms are damp, and I can feel sweat running down my temples. Not a day to check blood pressure. I get out and leave the keys in the drop box.

Although the thermometer says -20, I don't feel it until I am about four blocks from the truck. At this point the wind is biting from the east; the sun dogs are parentheses on the horizon, and that frost-bitten ear begins to ache. I feel experience, logic, and consequence coursing through my brain attacking stupidity while it struggles to defend itself, shrinking rapidly, but still, never gone.