

The Keystone State: Doing the Scranton Dodge

Fock 2: Lane Logic

As always, Max thrived (throve?) on Cruise Control. His favorite speed was just about 65, which is a nice stay-out-of-trouble pace, unless you're downtown or on winding backroads. We adopted an I-only-go-one-speed attitude:

- I am not going to go out of my way to get out of your way;
- I'm not trying to be in your way, but suck my underwear if I am!
- I'll pull over when it's convenient for me.

Cruise Control is great like that. With the mono-speed attitude, all competitive urges are squelched; you simply can't race somebody when you can only go one speed, now can you? You thumb your nose at other traffic and smugly hold your course. The challenge is ignoring the feisty fools growling at your rear bumper – like Beamsboy on the Taconic -- but that can also become the fun part. (Funny, though, how it never seems fun when *I'm* the rear-bumper growler.)

I always make sure I am doing *at least* the speed limit when I'm on Cruise Control. If you thumb your nose and smugly hold your course when you are going under the posted pace, you deserve all the abuse you get. I know you'll certainly get plenty from me.

Speed Limit can really be taken both ways, after all, can't it? I know the intention is "Maximum Speed" but, let's face it, on highways where 55 is posted, that really should be called "Recommended Speed": go less than that, and you become a potentially dangerous obstacle. If you want to go less than 55, then stay the hell off my highway, you slowass bastid. There are plenty of backroads you can clog.

I'm going to admit a little bit of befuddlement here. After all the miles of highway driving in my roadtripping career, there are still quite a few things that piss me off about America's roads. And that doesn't even include all the bozos and dweebs and rockheaded morons who drive on them.

First of all, let's get our lanes straight, shall we? I mean, which is the "inside" and which is the "outside"? I used to think that this was a cut-and-dried issue, whatever that means. [Where does that phrase come from? Woodcutting, of course! It stems back to the ancient practice of cutting wood and letting it dry out thoroughly before using it in a fire. It has been cut, it has dried; it is a done deal, and it is ready to burn, baby, burn.] To me, the OUTside lane was the far-left lane, the fast lane, the passing lane. But then I came to find out that a significant number of people call that lane the INside lane, because it's nearest the center of a divided highway.

Example 1: One side of a highway. You enter on the right, onto the INside lane, and move OUT to pass, right? Do you ever move IN to pass? Well, yeah, but that's only if there's a slowass bastid in the fast lane, and then you say you're passing on the INside anyway.

Example 2: Both sides of the highway. When viewed this way, the two breakdown lanes are on the OUTside edges of the road, and the fast lanes are IN the middle, next to the ubiquitous Jersey barriers. You come IN to the road from the OUTside.

So, which is it?? Can we speak the same language here? If I'm in the middle lane, and some passenger blurts out, "Quick! Get in the outside lane, for God's sake!" which way should I go? Do I have time to query back, "Well, now, Beatrice, exactly which lane are you referring to: the lane on my left where the wild and reckless run rampant, or the lane on my right where the meek and mild skulk along with their tails between their legs?"

More likely, I'll simply retort, "Shut your droolhole, you lowly passenger, I'm King of the Road in this chariot and I'll choose my own damn lane. Now sit back, be terrified, and fetch me another chilled beverage."

Now, on a running track, the left lane (lane 1) is the inside lane. They are numbered from the infield out, based on what lane is inside on the turns. So that muddles things a bit. But I still lean the other way on highways. The left lane is the outside lane. So there.

OK, so I can live with that befuddlement. Just don't use that terminology around me. Call them the "fast lane" or "slow lane". Or if you don't like that, go with numbers: Lane 1 is next to the breakdown lane; Lane 2 is to the left of that; Lane 3 is farther to the left; and, if you're driving through Atlanta, Lane 6 is that lane waaaaay the hell over to the left there.

Yes, I know that's opposite of the way a track is numbered, but it only makes sense to number them in the order that you drive through them, right? You hit the right lane first, so it's Lane 1. End of discussion.

No. Shut up. We're done with that. Hush.

So, now, I'm driving along this nice new three-lane highway (no, that does not include the breakdown lane, and yes, I'm only referring to one side of the damn highway) somewhere in Virginia, and I see a typical, innocent looking highway sign that reads:

RIGHT LANE ENDS, 1 MILE

Well, now, I'm mad.

How can this be, I ask myself. [I can't ask anyone else because, at the time, I'm driving solo from New Orleans to Boston, and I'm in the middle of an 894-mile day. Hence the musings.]

I go a mile down the road and, sure enough, the road narrows down to two travel lanes. But what remains??? The LEFT lane, which I'm in, and the RIGHT lane. The MIDDLE lane is the one that's gone!

There's still a right and a left; there has to be! You can't have a left and a middle without a right. That would be like those stupid pizza shops that sell pizzas and sandwiches as Large and Medium. I've purposely gone in and ordered a small ham and cheese sub just to see what they say, and they've actually told me, "No small, only large and medium." I wanted to argue with them, but (a) their English was limited, and (b) I have a general belief that it's unwise to piss off somebody who is preparing your food.

But you can't *do* that! "Medium" means middle, the size between your big one and your small one. If you have only two sizes, then they are Big and Little. That's it. No medium. And *definitely* no "happy medium".

Where the hell does that phrase come from? *Well, Joan, there has to be a happy medium.* You never hear about cheerful larges or giddy smalls. Does the medium have to be happy? Won't it fit if it's grumpy?

So, if you only have two lanes, they have to be the extremes: right/left, inside/outside, whatever. By definition, you CAN'T have just a Left Lane and a Middle Lane. That pig just don't fly.

I can understand the highway department's logic here, though, for once. If they announced that the middle lane was ending, people would get very confused and would not know where to go. They would envision their precious middle ground turning to dirt and grass while the left and right sail blissfully on around them. Plus, they wouldn't know which way to go: out among the lions, or in among the lambs. They would panic, and cause further consternation to those sane drivers like myself.

Then there are those HOV lanes: High Occupancy Vehicles. Can we add a few more syllables, please? And "High Occupancy" usually means two! TWO!! What's so High Occupancy about TWO?? And around D.C., motorcycles are allowed in the HOV lane. I guess one is high enough occupancy on a hog. But I still like driving that lane when I have company: you can't get passed, and you get to thumb your nose at the loners in the clogged up regular lanes. God forbid you get caught in that lane with a bus stalled out in front of you though. Nowhere to go, and a whole lot of snide laughter from the normal traffic.

Signs always catch my eye anyway – might be all those years as an English major/teacher – but even moreso on the road, maybe because there is time to puzzle over odd phrasings and ideas that are poorly communicated. A few on this trip really stood out:

- On the back of a U-Haul truck: "ALL OPTIONS STANDARD". Hmmm. That one had my mind going in circles for several miles. It outright irked me. If something is optional, then it's not standard, and if it's standard, then there is nothing optional about it. If all options are standard, then there are no options, so how could they be standard??
- On a Charlotte NC auto repair shop: "N.C. Inspections – Minimum Wait". Wouldn't that be *no wait at all??* You'd just drive by and they would slap the sticker on your windshield as you passed. I'll bet it doesn't work that way.

- A bumper sticker in Hilton Head: “I didn’t do it. You can’t prove it. Nobody saw me. The sheep are lying.” WTF?
- Roadside sign in West Virginia, in letters so small that I had to take my eyes off the road for several seconds to try to read it: “Please drive carefully”.
- Outside a Quality Inn in Florida: “Junior Size Olympic Pool”. How big *is* that?
- Some barbed-wire enclosed fields and buildings somewhere: “The [East Bumfuck] Correctional Facility.” Now, come on: “correctional facility?” Who are we fooling, and why are we bothering? Is this so the inmates won’t develop poor self-esteem about being in “jail” or “prison” after committing those thefts, murders, and rapes? Is it a way to try to save a little face? Does anybody really say, *My friend’s in the correctional facility doing five-to-seven*. What is being “corrected”? They are in there for past offenses, and you can’t correct the past. Ask Lady Macbeth. Maybe they should syllabloat it a little more and call it a “Non-Voluntary Behavioral Modification Laboratory.” You’re in jail, guy.

But one of the worst cases of syllabloating occurred in Needham, Mass. There was a small, yellow neighborhood road sign that, for years, had warned motorists of the “Deaf Person” who lived on Intervale Road. At some point, this must have somehow been deemed offensive, and political correctness was brought to bear. Our tax dollars paid for a new sign, which now alerted passers-by of the “Hearing Impaired Individual.” From three syllables to nine. From an easy-to-read 10 letters, bloated up to 25!

Now, I can understand the difference between “hearing impaired” and “deaf.” Danno cannot hear in one ear, so he is hearing impaired, but his other ear is fully functional, so he is not deaf – unless, of course, he is sleeping on that side. (However, I do know that the person in the house behind the sign was, indeed, deaf.)

So, I can appreciate that change, ill-guided as it was. But “individual”??? What’s wrong with the word “person”?! Is there something offensive, insensitive, demeaning, sexist, or racist about calling a person a person?? An “individual” could be a dog, or a fish, or a cockroach, or a tree – anything, as long as it was just *one* by itself. It could be a fire hydrant: one individual hydrant, as opposed to a cluster of the little red fuckers. And most of those are deaf anyway!

And what truly set me off about this one, though, was the sign that appeared only a couple of miles up the road, at the rear driveway of some industrial complex. The sign was a white vertical rectangle, with a black silhouette of a truck in the middle, and a large red O with a line through it, superimposed over the truck.

So, we can post “Hearing Impaired Individual” on a sign, but “No Trucks” is too much to handle on another! It’s enough to make you fart.