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Guest Commentary By Anne Eggebroten

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Let's not fear the D word: Dementia

"If you saw me coming, why didn't you get out of the way?" Russell Weller asked after striking dozens of people with his car, according to witnesses testifying in the trial now in its third week here in Santa Monica.

Those words sound so familiar to me.

I heard the same logic when my grandfather, then about 75 years old, was driving on a rural road in Colorado. A cow had wandered onto the highway, but Grandpa did not slow down or even swerve until my mother grabbed the wheel, screaming at him.

"Didn't you see that cow? Why didn't you slow down?" we asked afterward.

"That cow shouldn't have been there," he answered.

It became a joke in our family, part of the lore we associated with Grandpa as he declined into senility before his death at age 83.

But recently, my mother came up with the same logic.

In 2000, she totaled her Mercury Grand Marquis, plowing squarely into a parked car one block away from her home in Boulder, Colo.

We'd spent a couple of years trying in vain to get her to stop driving. I'd contacted the police department, her doctor and the DMV, but all declined to take steps to revoke her license. They said it was up to us, her family, to take away her keys.

The DMV did ask her to take a behind-the-wheel driving test as a result of my letters, but Mom managed to take it not in Boulder, but in a small town with wide streets. She passed.

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In court after the accident, she agreed not to buy another car and thus stopped driving. At the time, her excuse was the sunlight in her eyes. We didn't challenge her on that one, though you could hardly be blinded by light while driving south at 8am in May.

She's now 87 years old and has a diagnosis of Lewy Body Dementia, so I was not surprised a few days ago when she said she wanted to buy a new car and start driving again.

"But Mom, you hit a parked car, remember?" I chided her. "You don't have a driver's license anymore."

"That car shouldn't have been there," she said.

I was stunned. How could she come up with an excuse that had been a family joke for years?

The answer is dementia. Her mental capacity has declined in the six years since she first struggled to give an acceptable reason for the accident.

Weller's use of the same logic — that the pedestrians should not have been there as he drove through the Farmers' Market — reveals his state of mind on July 16, 2003.

There's no need to try to figure out whether "pedal error" occurred, whether he lost control of the vehicle, or whether his movement of the steering wheel could reveal an intent to hit people.

Let's face it: Anyone who could stumble out of that car into a scene of carnage and blame the pedestrians was not in his right mind.

Should he be convicted of 10 counts of vehicular manslaughter with gross negligence? Sure, why not? He was negligent all right, and a conviction might scare more older drivers off the road. But the negligence extends to all of us.

We need to accept the reality of senile dementia and the many forms it can take.

We need to have the courage to take keys away from family members before any more accidents happen ... and to give up the keys ourselves when the time comes.

We need to lobby in Sacramento for yearly, mandatory road tests for people 75 years and older. There was no need for Bryan Cox to be driving at age 96 and kill Brandi Jo Mitock in a crosswalk on Montana Avenue near 23rd Street in 1998.

We also need to work for alternate forms of transportation here in California where automobiles drive our lives.

What can you do today?

If you do nothing more, go to the Web site of WISE Senior Services here in Santa Monica and learn

Monica on Fourth Street at Colorado (www.wiseseniors.org) and click on "Transportation." You'll find information on driver safety classes and on Santa Monica's Dial-A-Ride program. It may come in handy some day.


If you're over 50 and feeling more ambitious, join the AARP and get them to stop lobbying against tighter licensing of senior motorists.

Keeping drivers like Russell Weller and Bryan Cox off the road is not going to limit *their* cherished freedoms. It's just doing them a favor.

Anne Eggebroten is a writer and research scholar with the Center for the *Study of Women* at UCLA. Her blog, Doing Dementia, can be found at www.doingdementia.blogspot.com.

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