



Volume 11, 2022

Driving Lessons for Self-Care

By John Fletcher

The writer Anne Lamott maintains that there are three essential prayers, three messages believers send to the Divine (or, if you prefer, to a higher power or ultimate concern): *Help.*

*Thanks. Wow.*¹

Nothing inspires and audits my own prayer life more than driving. Though not a huge metroplex, Baton Rouge packs a stunning amount of complexity into its roadways. Getting from point A to point B always takes longer, and people in my part of the South don't always care to follow roadway conventions.

Of course, driving always involves some confrontation with mortality and risk. For those of you who drive, you know what it's like to slip into that state of life-and-death stakes that centers your awareness on the space before you, the people and cars and obstacles in front of you. You absorb the knowledge that, while a lot of what happens is in your control, the unexpected may happen, and you may find yourself relying on the strength of seatbelts and airbags. After all, there are some wacky folks on the road.

¹ Ann Lamott. *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead, 2012).

Not that I'm a saint behind the wheel. I'm an extremely nervous driver. I own a little 2010 Honda Fit that just won't go fast on command. I avoided driving as much as possible for a long time, didn't get my license until age twenty, and didn't drive regularly until I was thirty or so.

Becoming a driver provoked a drastic change to my prayer life. My pleas for help became sharper, more—how to say?—*hyperventilate-y*. “Help” started manifesting as a string of curse words screamed out, for instance, when a pedestrian vorps into existence right in front of you on the road and you slam on the brakes and swerve desperately. My “thanks” became more heartfelt: *Oh, thank you, God, that I didn't hit her!* Wow soon follows: *How am I not dead? How did I not kill someone? Who let me drive?*

Driving has inspired me to innovate beyond Lamott's trio. I dabble in the kind of imprecatory, *O God bring thine enemies to humiliation* prayers found in the Psalms, imploring God to teach that guy who cut me off a lesson. My roadway prayers regularly incorporate confession: *I do bemoan and bewail my failure to abide by that stop sign*. There's even penitence: *I deserve your angry honks, green truck. That was a foolish thing I just did*.

Some of my car prayers take the form of one-sided apostrophes, appeals delivered not so much to God as to other drivers who can't hear me but whose actions seem as inscrutable and capricious as any deity's. *Whatcha doin' there, guy? Can't tell where you're turning if you don't signal! No, no, by all means, don't stop at that red light! What are mere traffic laws to you?*

Sometimes, stuck in rush hour traffic or waiting to turn left on a busy street, I just cry out to creation in general: *Dagnabbit!*

I've noticed that I fall into a “driver voice” when reciting such prayers. I don't like that voice. It's me at my tightest, my most hectoring. It's the smallest and pettiest version of myself.

I've come to think of driving as a kind of testing ground for my ethics. It strips away my pretenses, shows me who I am under stress, and reveals my priorities and failings. I may endorse critical generosity in my scholarship but listen to me merging into rush-hour traffic on I-10. I may advocate ecological awareness and sacrifice, but—*look, I know the store is just a half-mile away, but it's raining and I'm tired and it's just easier to hop in my car and go.* I may teach theatre students about collaborative ethics, planning, and adaptability, but—*OK, if I'm going to get there, I need to speed up a bit, and why can't this car ahead of me even decide to go the speed limit. It's 45, not 35!*

There's that voice again.

Spiritual authors Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn once wrote that we become like the god we adore.² If we envision an angry, judgmental god, we become angrier and more judgmental toward others and ourselves. The analogue here is the theatrical wisdom that as you rehearse, so you perform. Rehearse at half-commitment, and you perform at half-commitment. We become what we practice.

What if it's the case that I become who I am when I drive? What if my car prayer voice starts bleeding into other stressful situations in my life?

I've been trying to intervene into that voice, to interrupt the fight-or-flight emergency mode that driving puts me into.

Can I slow down? Can I allow someone in more of a hurry to pass me without ill feeling? What if I take my foot off the gas to create a gap to allow someone in? Can I flash my lights to let someone know it's safe to merge? Shall I stop at this crosswalk to let a jogger or cyclist across the road?

² Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn. *Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 7.

I love the rush of gratitude and just plain faith in humanity that I get when someone does those sorts of things for me. And I know that I have benefited from such acts many times. Like all of us who have ever been in cars, really, I'm alive now because other people have been looking out for me. Not everyone, to be sure, drives with that awareness. But enough people do. And I want to be more like that grateful person more often. I want to be the sort of person whose baseline impression of humanity is hopeful. More—I want to be that kind of person that creates such “wow” moments in others, someone who spreads good faith.

So, when the driver cuts me off, I try to breathe. I feel the flash of anger, even utter a curse word or two, and then shift as quickly as possible into a more generous perspective. I remind myself that there have been plenty of times when I've been the person who cuts someone else off. I don't know what kind of day the other person is having. I even try to bless them—*may God grant them what they need*. Surely, if they had what they needed, they'd not be so hasty or distracted.

The more experienced a driver I've become, the more I've started to value the importance of looking behind me. I don't just mean checking my rear-view mirror (or the backup camera for you fancy folk with your modern cars). That's basic. I mean living out a deeper awareness that *I'm* the person in front of other drivers behind me. I'm the unknown, dangerous X factor for other people. I'm the object of other people's crisis prayers of anger, fear, and frustration.

I even think about that when I'm pausing to let someone in or stopping at a crosswalk. I have to balance the pat-on-the-back boost I can get from doing a good deed with the awareness that my stopping stops those behind me. We've all been in those situations where we're stuck in an intersection because someone two cars up is pausing for some reason. My awareness must expand beyond my immediate space to cars two or three lengths behind me. I'm not the only one

on the road. I mean, I'm there; I can't pretend I don't exist or that my car doesn't matter. But it's not all about me—even when and if other drivers behave as if it's all about them.

What does any of this have to do with us here at MATC? Well—consider the way I describe driving: a high-stakes ordeal where you must anticipate random hazardous situations, only some of which are in your control. Is this not graduate school? Is this not the job market? The tenure track? Work-life balance?

How often we hear our students talking about school and real life, as if school weren't already real life. We talk about COVID as if it's the heterotopia—the temporary reversal of the usual order of things—and won't it be great when we get back to normal?

But what if this—whatever “this” is to you hearing or reading—*is* the normal? What if right now is where the rubber meets the road, and the ways that we talk to others—or to ourselves—in the prayers or curses we utter create who we are? What if we perform as we rehearse?

I leave you, then, with some ways to make that rehearsal better. They're tips for driving from a nervous driver, suggestions for prayer from someone who's still learning to pray. As with all kinds of general self-care advice like this, another vehicular adage applies: *your mileage may vary*.

- Make room for moments of *help*, *thanks*, and *wow*. Notice them. Value them.
- Pay attention to your car prayers, the words you speak aloud or to yourself as you drive.

Is this how you'd speak to others in person? Are your messages the ones you'd like to hear directed at yourself? Are there different tones you might adopt, different messages you might put into the world?

- Accept that incidents provoking rage, helplessness, and boredom are inevitable. You can affect some of these scenarios, but you can't avoid all of them. Sometimes bad things happen on the road, and it's healthy to have feelings about them.
- Embrace the dynamic tension of "you are important" and "it's not all about you." We live in busy, high-speed traffic with others. We cannot afford to drive as if we are the only ones who matter, nor does it help anyone for us to pretend we don't matter at all.
- Remember that there are people behind you. What you do or refrain from doing matters to those coming after you. There are folks watching you, people taking their cues from you and waiting for you to see them and make room for them.

I'll conclude with three quick prayers: Help me as I try to practice what I preach behind the wheel. Like I've said, I'm a lousy driver. Thanks to those hearing or reading this, many of whom spur me to drive better. And let me observe a humble "wow" that we are here on this road together.

Bibliography

Lamott, Ann. *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. New York: Riverhead, 2012.

Linn, Dennis et al. *Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994.