

Bill Rea ? How do you miss a school bus?

There was a time, and not too long ago, when I had real problems with all these rules against distracted driving, and the efforts of police to crack down on them.

On one level, I thought it was an invasion of my privacy, combined with the fact that people have been able to drive for decades holding their steering wheel with one hand. In my own case, I take my right hand off the wheel frequently when I'm driving, especially when I'm going through urban areas. One is obliged to do such things when driving a vehicle with a standard transmission, which is the case with me.

There are some people who still smoke while driving. I used to be in that group, although that is no longer the case. With the exception of one cigar about 10 years ago (presented to me by the proud father of two new twin boys), I haven't consumed tobacco in about 20 years.

Besides there are other things to distract drivers. One can get wrapped up in conversation with passengers. When I was a kid, I recall a couple of pretty heated arguments between my parents while my dad was driving. Besides, my understanding of the rules states it's okay to talk on a phone while driving, as long as it's not in you hand, so heated arguments are still possible. It's also possible to change radio stations, turn on the heater and make other adjustments while driving.

So for a while, I wondered what all the fuss was about.

I'm happy to report my position has changed somewhat in the last little while.

The statistics released in the last couple of weeks that indicate distracted driving is proving to be causing more deaths than impaired driving was something of an eye-opener.

OPP issued a statement about a month ago, that in 2013, distracted driving fatalities surpassed both impaired and speed-related fatalities in fatal motor vehicle collisions investigated by them. A total of 78 persons died in distracted driving related collisions compared to 57 impaired driving deaths and 44 speed related deaths last year.

True, those are OPP stats, applying only to OPP patrolled roads, but they are compelling and surprising. It is evident that this kind of activity is causing a certain amount of carnage.

And then I saw some pretty clear evidence with my own eyes last week.

I was driving down Dixie Road in Brampton shortly after 8 last Thursday morning, heading to a meeting of Peel Regional council. I saw I was coming up on a northbound school bus and noticed the flashing red lights had been activated (one would actually have thought they were hard to miss, but I was in for a surprise). I've always been a little bit troubled that bus drivers often turn on the lights while still moving, as there have been a couple of times when I've made an abrupt stop and watched the oncoming bus sail right past me, with all the lights going. But last Thursday was a different matter. I saw the bus and the lights in plenty of time. There was some traffic ahead of me that evidently was too close to stop safely, but I dutifully applied my breaks and stopped with no worries.

That should have been the case with the traffic behind me, and with one notable exception, it was.

I was in the inside (or passing) lane, and in my mirrors, I noticed a car coming up behind me in the curb lane.

That guy had better start acting, or he's going to have some problems, I remember thinking.

He didn't act ? In fact, he went right by me, much to my astonishment. He wasn't speeding excessively. I was able to get enough of a look at the driver to verify that he was in fact a he. And he also cruised right past the bus, continuing on his merry way.

Like I indicated, I was dumbfounded.

There is no way this guy should have realistically missed the bus, not with all the red lights going. It was a bright, sunny morning and the road was clear and dry. And one might have thought that the sight of my car stopped in the middle of a busy, well-travelled road would have conveyed some kind of message, along with the fact this was a prime time of day for school buses.

Although the look I got at this fellow wasn't good enough for me to make any assertions, I think it's a reasonable conclusion that his mind wasn't on his driving at that moment. He might have been talking on some device or he might have been thinking of the work day ahead. One thing he evidently was not thinking about was what was ahead of him on the road.

While I generally don't like to see anyone get in trouble, this was one of those times when I really wished a cop had been around. We have these laws dealing with the way drivers are supposed to behave around school buses for a very good reason.

This is not the first time I have seen such an occurrence, not even this year.

I saw something like that happen a couple of months ago. If memory serves, I was on King Street, heading into Bolton and I saw the oncoming bus with the lights flashing coming to a stop up ahead. I started slowing down, but the car ahead of me didn't; at least not until the very last minute, and by the time that car had come to a halt, it had already gone by the bus. After a couple of seconds of

hesitation, I guess the driver realized the situation had progressed to the point that nothing could be done. The car continued on its way, but I'll bet the driver was thinking thoughts of the 'I have sinned' variety.

Again, I don't know if the driver was distracted by something tangible, or just wasn't paying enough attention. The one thing that was clear was the driver's mind was not on driving, as it should have been.

So while I agree there should be little tolerance for these incidents, I'm also mindful that few of us have much business being sanctimonious. Most of us drive, and some of us do a lot more driving than others. Owing to the nature of my job, I know I do a lot more than most. That means I have a lot more chances to make mistakes. And I know I have made some.

So have many of you, I'm willing to bet.

While I have never, to the best of my knowledge, illegally passed a school bus, I know my driving record is not spotless, and there have been a few boners in my past for which the police did not catch me.

There was one late night early in my driving days when I was heading home. I was about half way through a major Toronto intersection when I suddenly realized I was running a red light. Fortunately, it was late enough at night that there was no traffic (including police cars) for me to crash into. I hadn't been drinking or anything like that. I simply hadn't been paying enough attention.

Thus, I have seen enough cases in which it's too easy to get distracted, or simply have attention drop while one is at the wheel. In most of these instances, we have been lucky, both that there wasn't a police officer around to catch us, and even luckier that there wasn't a car or pedestrian to hit.

Although there was a time when I objected to the infringement on my liberties from the new rules, I have taken some time to reflect and now have a much clearer understanding where those responsible are coming from.

So maybe the new rules aren't that bad after all

