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Contributors to Vehicular Violence

National statistics reveal that in the year 1975 over 20 000 young persons met death as the result of automobile accidents. Daily accounts in the news appall us, and there are few of us whose lives have not been touched, directly or indirectly, by such tragedy. We are still living the history of the motorcar, within the intricate phenomena of its use and abuse, and the vital place it has had in our economy. Automobiliation has, in half a century, instrumented great changes in our lifestyle and influenced our culture; it has altered our concepts of time and distance, our terrain and atmosphere, and revolutionized commercial enterprise. The immediacy of the auto, its gratifications, its utility, have tended to overwhelm and obscure thoughtful consideration of even the most significant vital implications of its use.

It seemed somehow surprising to me, when I worked with a multidisciplinary team investigating fatal auto accidents several years ago, to find that direct causation not infrequently involved drivers who were severely intoxicated, were legally blind, had established histories of serious chronic alcoholism, were suffering from incapacitating heart disease, or had notable current psychological problems. In such cases the accident must be seen in a broad context, as a denouement in a sequence of individual life factors and human interactions. The drivers were not alone in their mishaps, for the involvement of the significant others of their daily lives cannot be discounted.

Mr. A., 67, a retired manufacturer's representative, loved cars and had spent most of his life on the road. The company had furnished him with a new car every two years, and his personal car he kept in excellent condition for the long family trips he so enjoyed. He boasted, "Never an accident in a quarter of a million miles!" Recovering from a serious attack of coronary occlusion he could not wait to get back "behind the wheel," even though his physician sternly warned against it. A firm devotee of things mechanical, he liked to believe that his pacemaker had made his heart like new. Driving in slow urban traffic one day on the way to a doctor's appointment he suffered an attack and lost consciousness. The car struck the back of a truck, he died of a head injury, and his wife beside him was badly hurt. As she said later, "Driving was his life, he could not live without it."

Mr. B., 34, a steady drinker for years and given to severe drunken sprees, had been arrested a number of times for driving under the influence. However, a clever attorney, legal technicalities, and the plea that he needed his licence to earn his living had kept him on the road most of the time. On occasions when his license was suspended, he drove anyway. His drinking made him an unreliable employee and disrupted his home life. He abused his wife and children who often called in the police, resulting in overnight stays for him in jail and several periods of detoxification. He had always claimed that he drove better with "a few drinks," and he never heeded his wife's admonition: "You'll kill yourself

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in that car one of these times." Whether that was prophecy, heartfelt warning, or wishful thinking, he did lose control of his car, crossed the medial strip, and crashed into an oncoming vehicle, killing himself and two other persons.

Mr. C., 24, had had to leave college because of a depressive condition. After several weeks of hospitalization for mental illness he was discharged to outpatient therapy. He discontinued that after a few months, claiming that buying a new sports car would be a better investment in his mental health. His father had also had depressions and eventually had shot himself at age 48. Mr. C's depression continued and he fairly frequently expressed ideas that nothing was worthwhile in life. He tinkered obsessively with his car and impulsively took off in it at all hours, to drive aimlessly about the countryside. On one evening he fervently told his mother that everything was going to work out very well for him. He then retired early, but at 4:00 a.m., leaving a note with a simple "good-bye," he drove to the nearby freeway, and at high speed crashed his car into an overpass support. He was killed instantly.

Driving an automobile figured largely in the lives of these three cases, as it does with much of the general population. The automobile is and means many things to people beyond the utilitarian transport, or a more efficient substitute for beast of burden, as envisioned and promulgated by Henry Ford. It has become a symbol of status, power, wealth, an extension of one's physical being, and a projection of one's inner mind. Indeed, one's internalized concept of owning and driving a motorcar may be very closely allied with mechanisms and forces that operate to maintain the integrity of the personality, and so may provide significant outlets for the expression of tension, frustration, aggression, or sexuality as well as for feelings of autonomy, freedom, independence, escape, excitement, and adventure. The extent, nature, and degree of such intrapsychic phenomena varies with individuals, may entail a relatively simple part of living, may become exaggerated in times of stress, or in some may be pathologically pervasive and characterological.

This interest in the automobile begins in adolescence, the most unstable stage of emotional development, requiring a panoply of ego-defense mechanisms and many means of self-expression. It is the time of loosening family ties and constraints, rebelling, testing, and seeking to consolidate masculine identity in dealing with problems of aggression, expression and control, and heterosexuality; a time of ebullience with much need for tension release, prowess, and excitement. Normally in earliest adolescence interest in having and driving an automobile quickens and often becomes a prevailing preoccupation. This is easily understood in terms of the fact that a car can enhance new feelings of freedom and independence, can symbolize masculine adequacy, and provide new outlets for powerful feelings. By the time of legal driving age possession of a car is seen as a primary goal or accomplishment, to be attained by working and saving or through affluent parents. For others, less well endowed or fortunate, the wish is no less strong, and may even be stronger, so that some may act out the wish by stealing other people's cars.

Car theft by adolescent boys is very common in large cities and residential sections bordering slums or housing projects. The legal charge is usually "unauthorized use of a motor vehicle," a misdemeanor, if the intent was only to use and not to possess, which would then constitute a felony. It is so common among certain groups of boys as to seem to constitute a sort of puberty rite. The boys vie with their peers for the number of cars they can "jockey" in a week, or even in an evening, and gain status by taking the fastest or most expensive cars. Such accepted peer group activities are definitively socio-syntonic, and, as occurring in most of the boys, ego-syntonic as well. It seems that these ego benefits override other considerations to the extent that they lose sight of the fact that they are stealing, that the car really belongs to someone else who may be seriously inconvenienced by their acts.

As one talks with them, they are open and not defensive about their activities and the pleasures derived, and even though they are not generally antisocial they do not show

guilt about their using the cars. Notable is their denial or dissociation of any thoughts or concepts about the real owners of the vehicles. In using the cars, if they drive well (and most are capable) and stay away from the police, they have high odds of not getting caught. These odds, of course, decrease greatly if they are drinking or using drugs. Then high speeds and poor judgment can lead to collisions that sometimes are very serious. A particular hazard, however, has been the "P.C." or police chase. When spotted by police many boys are unable to give themselves up, and so a chase ensues, with panic overwhelming them in their efforts to escape. Such situations may result in boys, police, or others being seriously injured or killed. The boys of this group are not seen as suffering from any real psychopathology, but in general they have been unsupported in many of their adolescent needs, coming from fatherless, socioeconomically and culturally deprived homes with no secure position in society. Their good assets and potentials lie underdeveloped for the most part, and it seems very important that measures should exist that would not only spare their lives but also ensure and enhance their optimal social and personal development. Thus, in a sense, their social problems are brought to attention through their car stealing and sometimes serious accidents. More immediate forms of prevention and control are in the campaigns to compel car owners to lock their cars and install anti-theft devices, "HOTCAR" campaigns, and police policy changes that are occurring in many areas to modify apprehension pursuit procedures.

Some adolescent deaths by car seem quite unexplainable, but close multidisciplinary investigation with the use of the "psychiatric autopsy" may reveal some principal causative ingredients of the accidents. A series of these so investigated seemed to feature personalities overcompensated in their ego defensive structures, with heavy reliance upon the mechanisms of intellectualization, compliance, suppression, and repression, with overdependence on their parents and inability to express aggressive self-assertion. With them, despite successes in many areas of endeavor and parental approbation, important basic drives for the exercise of masculine aggression and sexuality had not been allowed appropriate expression. Thus, they came to the end of adolescence with intense inner conflicts entailing despair and fury about their inadequacy to face maturity. With such a precarious explosive intrapsychic situation, a symbolic incident may lead to a sense of overwhelming frustration and precipitate an outburst of self-destructive violence.

D, just 18, was a successful young man by parental and community standards. He was handsome, intelligent, mannerly, willing, and compassionate at all times. An excellent student, he was salutatorian for graduation and had been vice-president of his senior class. He had been admitted to the Ivy League college from which his father had graduated. Athletically he was runner-up champion on the tennis team and earlier had been prominent in scouting, attaining the rank of Eagle Scout. He had had a pleasant but non-sexualized relationship with a girl friend since age 16. At 17 he had bought his own car, having earned the money working in the town library. While he did well at whatever he undertook, he seemed to lack a sense of enjoyment in accomplishment. In retrospect, those who knew him well were disinclined to say that he had any faults, but would reluctantly admit that he was not self-assured or assertive, that he always seemed to be pleasing someone else, as if he had no wants or needs of his own. He did not drink, smoke, or use drugs. On the evening of his high school graduation reception he seemed unusually jovial, conversing with a number of friends on the theme that the "best years" of their lives had now come to an end. Later, driving his girl friend home, he made some tentative sexual advances to which she responded with surprise, saying that she did not think of him in that way, that he was as a brother to her. He seemed to accept that, but was uncharacteristically sullen as he dropped her off. On the way to his home, driving at a very high rate of speed, he crashed his car into a tree by the roadside and was killed.

There are also adolescents who, in acute situations involving particular combinations of stress, guilt, and oppression, may suffer a transient breakdown of their defense mech-

anisms with a consequent breakthrough of violent primitive rage. E at 15 had seemed a reasonably well adjusted adolescent, although he had had a running battle with his father of some intensity during the previous year. Earlier he and father had been very close. The father had had a coronary attack and E was noticeably subdued and depressed during the convalescence, was listless and preoccupied, and did poorly at school. Upon recovery father continued to be closely involved with E, but was overanxious and hypercritical of him, particularly of what the father saw as E's indolence and passivity. One day they drove together to a nearby pond for fishing, but father was more intent on berating E for his poor school marks than in the sport. When father announced that he would not allow E to use the family car for the rest of the school term, E, overcome with rage, threw down his fishing gear, ran to the car, and drove off furiously, leaving father stranded. Blind with rage he missed seeing a car pull out from a side street and crashed into it. Both occupants were killed but E was miraculously unhurt. Overcome with grief at what he had done, the next day he hanged himself in the detention cell.

Thus, while the automobile may figure prominently in expression of psychological needs in normal adolescents, although sometimes with disastrous consequences, and as an instrument for the expression of destructive rage in conflicted adolescents, it also may figure centrally in the more definitive psychopathological conditions of adolescents. Two kinds of compulsive conditions, one a neurotic manifestation and the other representing a deeper, more malignant type of character disorder, appeared in our series.

F at 14 had already been in court many times for unauthorized motor vehicle use, committed several times to the Youth Service Department, and escaped from numerous placements, often taking cars belonging to the staff of such facilities. The youngest of four and the only boy, he had first tried taking cars when only ten years old, and around the time that his father left the family and remarried. Father was a policeman, and F claims that his father had taught him to drive when he was nine "because he wanted to be sure that I'd always be a good driver." F is a good driver indeed, and his one pride in himself is the fact that of all the cars he has stolen he has never had even a slight accident. He has, however, on several occasions rammed purposefully into police cars when they had closed in on him. In interview F was seen as large for his age, but he had a certain wistful boyish appeal. He was open about his long list of offenses, saying, "I just got this thing, I got to steal cars, something makes me do it, it's like dope, I can't stop." He wants to stop because it ruins his whole life. He has not been to school for two years or been at home because he is always in court, detention, placement, or on the run. Also, having a record may spoil his chances of realizing his ambition to become a policeman like his father when he grows up. In addition he has bad dreams that upset him. He dreams of being chased by his father in a police car going 320 km/h (200 mph), the chase seems to go on for hours, and finally both cars go off a cliff and explode. It would appear that F, in his compulsive car theft, is acting out his intense inner feelings of loss, anger, and need that arose in his father's defection and is caught up in a neurotic solution at once gratifying and devastating for him.

G, 16, is representative of a small group of youths who cause more trouble and concern for themselves and the community than all other delinquents put together. While their crimes and misbehavior are not confined to car theft and flagrant dangerous motor vehicle violations, this is a most flagrant feature of their pathological activities. We may first have contact with these boys upon being called to the youth detention center for emergency consultation because of a suicidal attempt or "psychotic" behavior. The story is usually that the boy, admitted there the previous day, had at once begun provoking attendants in a most hostile way, becoming openly combative in response to their efforts to control him, and forcing them to put him in an isolation room. Once locked in he loses control of himself completely, screaming, cursing, banging, dashing about the room in a self-destructive way until exhausted after many hours, and then, with renewed energy, making

a suicidal attempt if at all possible or continuing his furious tantrum. When interviewed he may be hostile and defiant and express suggestively paranoid trends, may be withdrawn and uncommunicative, or may respond in ways reminiscent of Ganser's syndrome. These boys then often demand to be transferred to a mental hospital. When so committed, however, they escape from the hospital and in a matter of hours are back in jail following a wild police chase. They escape again, steal more cars, and are soon apprehended again with additional charges involving drugs, alcohol, assault on a policeman, or manslaughter.

Intervention into this vicious cycle is indeed made all but impossible by the nature of their pathology and acting out and their inevitable enmeshment in the legal and correctional systems. In interviews with them in calmer moods they often seem to relate and to express contrition and a great desire for help. But when, in hopeful response to this, they are placed in a constructive, open program, they soon leave to resume their usual pattern. Further interviews then reveal their great feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, alienation, and lack of trust. Quite apparent are their inner rage against parental figures and their self-destroying guilt which are of such tremendous force that they compel externalization. Very early diagnosis with the institution of firm treatment measures in a structured, clinically oriented setting is the only hope for helping boys of this category.

Just as cars are popular with adolescents, so are alcohol and drugs, which the adolescent may similarly use for psychological compensation and expression. Adolescents who are driving late at night under the influence of alcohol or drugs constitute a real hazard, probably accounting for the greater percentage of auto accidents and deaths in this age group. The lowering of the legal drinking age from 21 to 18 in many states a few years ago has led to an appreciable increase in these morbid statistics and, significantly, to include new numbers of younger juveniles 13 to 15 years of age.

While adolescence in itself can contribute to vehicular violence, attaining a license to drive a car is, in our culture, a real part of growing up, and nearly all 16-year-olds are quite capable of assuming the privileges entailed. Prevention and control of vehicular violence must involve concerted and continuing efforts for better approaches to the problems of alcohol and drug abuse, using motor vehicles without authority, and psychiatric disturbances in adolescents.

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