

Traffic

I was engrossed in conversation with a business friend in her fitness club one morning when we saw an elderly woman get out of her sedan and approach the door. We stopped talking as we saw her drawn, worried face. Before the woman's hand made contact with the door handle, my friend remarked, "Who is this? Do you know her?"

The white-haired lady slightly built with bowed, arthritic shoulders tentatively entered the brightly lit center. "I'm lost," she said. Then her ears caught the loud music blaring for the four women straining on the exercise equipment. As her eyes darted around the room, searching for the source of the drum beat and voice, she took two steps back toward the door and touched the metal handle. By then my friend had jumped up from behind the wrap-around desk and come to the woman's side. "How can I help you?" she said gently.

"I've never been down this road before and I'm lost. The traffic is going so fast that I can't get across the highway." Her voice cracked and became louder when she said *LOST*, fading to a whisper when she said *HIGHWAY*.

My friend and I responded in unison, "Oh, just go to the next traffic light and make a U-turn."

The white-haired woman in the pink blouse and denim shirt shook her head as if to say "no," then responded, "But, where is the light? They're coming so fast, I can't get across."

My friend stepped closer to the woman and gently touched her forearm. "Where are you going today?"

The lady responded to the softness in my friend's voice and focused her clear blue eyes directly at my friend's face, "Why, I'm going to Tennessee. I've driven there a hundred times! Never had a problem. But, this morning, I can't find the exit for I-20 West," she said as she twisted the pocket of her skirt. In that moment her face was no longer that of an elderly woman, but a young child, lost and uncertain.

Again, my friend and I responded in unison, "Oh my -- all that way alone?"

"I'll be there by the time the children get home from school. Katie is in second grade and Lindsey is in fourth. If I can just find the right exit," Her voice rose with the children's names and fell as she nodded toward the traffic.

In the few minutes the woman had been in the room, her anxiety had visibly reduced and a wan smile flickered across her face. "Now, if you girls will tell me, again, which way to turn and how to get to the light."

“Let me show you,” my friend said to the woman. I watched as they stepped from the curb to the parking lot floor and observed my friend’s arms gesturing up and out indicting a right turn. The soundless conversation in the parking lot suddenly made me aware of the exercising women mute to me while I had been focused on the elderly woman’s dilemma. The noise clicked on as if by remote control and suddenly I had returned to the present moment aware of the hissing sound of the exercise equipment and the wall of mirrors reflecting the self-assured participants.

The bell tingled and the glass entrance door re-opened as my friend entered talking, “Oh, I’m so worried about that woman! You know, I should have driven her the three miles to I-20,” her eyebrows arched up and down as she talked and her voice modulated as if she was speaking to a young child. “Do you think that she will get to Tennessee?” she said as she pressed her hands and nose against the glass door looking out into the on-going traffic.

I walked the five feet between the desk and where my friend stood looking out at the cars and trucks rushing back and forth, “All she needed was the correct direction and a little assurance. You gave her that. She will be fine.”

Life is “traffic.” There is constant coming and going. Sometimes it goes so fast that getting on or off seems impossible. We miss the exits. We miss the on-ramps. Intersections where we could make a U-turn or take a detour are hidden from us because we have trapped ourselves by traveling at the same acceleration as the vehicles on either side of us. This is unconscious movement. Conscious movement, on the other hand, is being fully aware of direction and consequences which incrementally increases the chances of arriving at a desirable destination.

The traveler who came into my friend’s business that morning knew that seeing her granddaughters in Tennessee was her chosen destination. And, she was keenly aware that it was going to be a difficult, if not impossible, achievement if she did not take a risk. The risk that she took was to get out of the traffic – leave it, stop, reassess, ask for directions. Having done that, she re-entered the flow from a new direction.

Take a bold step. Leave the traffic. Ask where you are. Say where you want to go. Don’t be afraid to ask for directions. There is a wonderful intersection just ahead at which you can make a U-turn.

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