

While distracted driving is not a new concept, it is the latest driving epidemic that has taken hold of drivers throughout society. Distracted driving is not just a teen or young driver issue. It afflicts every demographic in our society, hence the use of the term epidemic. While most people would define distracted driving as texting or using your cell phone while driving, distracted driving is much deeper than the above generalizations. In a society where multitasking has become a normal practice, multitasking in a vehicle is the purest definition of distracted driving. I have seen examples of these throughout my life. As a young child, I can remember my mom fishing on the floor in the back seat for my brother's sippy cup while driving down the road. I can remember my dad eating in the front seat and looking down for another fry or dipping another nugget in his favorite dipping sauce going well over the speed limit on the interstate. Even my grandfather, the safest driver I know, ran off the road trying to kill a bug on his dash while taking me on a golf outing. While none of these resulted in an accident, all are common examples of things that people do in cars every day many of which result in accidents.

I have always considered myself a safe driver. I always wear my seatbelt while in the car, always maintain a safe driving speed for the conditions, never have more than one other person in the car with me at a time, and I rarely use my cell phone in the car. With these practices in place, I have avoided what many of my classmates have already experienced, an automobile accident. I have never even been involved in a fender bender with a pole, tree, or some other immovable object. I have heard the advertisements on television and have been drilled by my parents that taking your eyes off the road to text or answer a call can be fatal. While I heard all that, the concept never hit home until one late night in early February of this year.

I was out late that evening because the Notre Dame basketball team played Wheeling Central in Wheeling. I was hyped after the game because we had beaten our biggest rival and the team ranked number one in Class 'A'. As I remember it, we had arrived at the school on the bus around 11:30 pm still celebrating the victory. As we all got in our cars and left for home, I remember turning to my favorite XM station on the radio and turning it up a couple of extra notches. I was singing along with the song that was playing as I made my way through downtown Clarksburg. As I drove through the first light near the post office, the next song came on, which I did not particularly like. I am going about thirty miles an hour at this time and I quickly look up at the next light, which is at the corner of Chestnut Street. It was green, so I thought I would change the XM station and find a song I liked. In the three or four seconds it took me to find that song, the light changed to red and I promptly went through the intersection almost being hit by another vehicle. All this happened while I was trying to find a song on the radio. The horn from their vehicle startled me and changed my life at that point. Knowing what almost happened, I drove home a nervous wreck. I didn't tell my parents that night what had happened for fear of getting an hour-long lecture from each of them. Over the next couple of days, I drove through that part of town and relived the memory in my mind every time. I did some research and realized that I had traveled about fifty yards in that three seconds. I was distracted for fifty yards and it could have caused an accident. Those public service announcements finally hit home, but I had to have the experience to understand the danger.

Being a Catholic by faith, I always try to give up some bad habit during the Lenten season. When my mom asked me on Ash Wednesday what I was giving up for Lent, I announced in a humble voice, "I am giving up listening to music in my car." Of course, my inquisitive mother would not let a statement like that go without a further interrogation. So, I explained to her

what had happened about a week or so earlier. Her only statement was something like, “you need to focus while you are driving and quit being distracted!” At the writing of this essay, I have not used the radio in my car for almost forty straight days. While I will probably turn the radio back on after the Easter season ends, I have made a commitment to myself that I will never be distracted for fifty yards ever again.

Finding a cure for this plague in our society is difficult. Societal issues like this one, like drunk driving, will never be completely eradicated from our roadways. Our goal must be to provide each generation of drivers with information about the dangers and hope that those drivers build and maintain safe driving dispositions that include not being distracted while driving. Our first step must be the education of our young drivers about the risks surrounding distracted driving. This could best be implemented in our driver’s education courses in our high schools. While the subject was touched on briefly during my driver’s education class, it should take a more prominent position in the curriculum. Next, we must make it a national campaign that provides drivers with incentives to not be distracted while using a vehicle. We could also collaborate with national insurance companies to provide a media blitz that would target all drivers with information about distracted driving. Since technology is the biggest reason people are distracted while driving, we could work with insurance companies to give discounts to drivers they insure who download and use an app that would make their phone virtually distraction-free while they are driving. We could use law enforcement to give a presence to this campaign by holding “technology checkpoints”, much like the ones they now use for drunk or impaired drivers.

While these steps may prevent many from distracted driving as a common practice when they are behind the wheel, for others they will have to learn this lesson as I did, from experience. Luckily, I learned the lesson without being involved in an accident. Many drivers won’t be as

fortunate. Some will lose their life or cause the death of others before they realize the dangers of distracted driving. Distracted driving changes lives, for better or worse. My only hope is that people will make the right choices when it comes to distracted driving before they have to experience those fifty yards that will change their lives forever.