

With as much as we know now about the safety risks of distracted driving I am always amazed at how many people, young and old alike, still get caught up in it. Society makes us feel as if we must respond to that Pavlovian ding of our cell phones within an instant. But is anything the phone could be telling us important enough to potentially die over? The simple answer is no.

I never thought that one of my distracted driving experiences would occur around my grandmother. Of all people, shouldn't she be aware of the dangers that exist by either answering a call or a text? The two of us were on our way back from Morgantown when a call came through from my aunt that just moved to Florida. My grandmother picked up her I-phone and answered the call without a second thought. It didn't matter to her that we were in the midst of rush hour Morgantown traffic; she just started chatting. At the time I didn't think anything about the fact that she was driving distracted. Then, a minute or two later I saw the spinning blue lights reflecting in my side mirror. My attention perked up as the officer, stern and very direct, told my grandmother that she was blatantly breaking the law. My grandmother, nana to me, who knits socks and bakes cookies, was getting a citation for distracted driving. Reality check: it doesn't matter how old you are or how sweet you are, the police are taking distracted driving seriously, as of course they should.

Flash forward a few months and an instance occurred that could have changed my family's lives forever. On our way back from a college road trip we were passing through Cumberland, Maryland. It was dusk and the sun was just starting to slip beyond the horizon. I can remember wishing that we were closer to home I began to doze off for yet another nap on our long journey back from New York. Then out of nowhere, sounds that I never wanted to hear woke me from my slumber. Squealing brakes, glass and metal hitting the asphalt, and the gut wrenching screams of my mother jolted me upright. As I tried to make sense of what I was

hearing I realized that our family of four was safe but we weren't moving along on the highway any longer.

We were parked alongside interstate 68. Cars continued to race by us as my mom sat with her hands on the wheel looking seriously shook up. My father was on his phone placing a call to 911. My sister and I, tumbled around in the backseat, turned and looked behind us to see what had happened. Our hearts immediately sank at the images we saw at the exit sign. A car, or what was a car just a few minutes before, was crumpled up against the road signage. I heard my father telling the operator on the other end of the phone that a car had just crashed and things did not look good. What seemed like forever passed before the sirens began to come into earshot. A frenzy of emergency response services showed up at the scene: firetrucks, police cars, and ambulances. My family and I were all outside of our vehicle talking to the police about what had happened. The incident seemed surreal.

My mother explained to the officer that the vehicle in question had just swerved in front of us a split second before it struck the sign. They were trying to take the exit we were passing but didn't realize we were in the lane on their right. Luckily, through all this our car only had a tiny scrape on the front where the swerving car hit the bumper on its way into the exit sign. Later, it was determined that the driver of the car had been on her cell phone and didn't realize she was so close to the exit she was supposed to take. Without even a glance up from her phone she cut across traffic on the interstate in a failed attempt to exit I68.

This story could have been much worse. Someone could have died, or, even worse, we all could have died. All because of a distracted driver. I wish I had the answer of what it will take to get drivers to put the phone down and out of reach while driving. Modern technology has given us blue tooth and Apple Play in vehicles which reduces some driver's urge to reach for

their phone. Maybe the key is to have phones automatically turn off when they sense motion above a certain speed. Therefore, drivers wouldn't be distracted by that all too familiar dopamine rush that is triggered at the sound of a notification. Also, I think one of the best ways to prevent distracted driving is for parents and experienced drivers to set an example for children and young adults. I feel that children learn from the examples they see on a day to day basis. So, in that case, I feel that promoting good driving habits to adults as well as teens is of the utmost importance. Hopefully, one day, sooner rather than later, everyone puts down their phones, keeps their hands on the wheel, and their eyes on the road.