

Don't Be a Passenger on the Road to Success

The Audition

I found the traffic school job in the *Los Angeles Times* classifieds. The ad mentioned fun and the importance of an outgoing personality. I reported to a church basement for a group interview.

Trudy, a woman of about 70, introduced herself and told us 52 applicants (I counted) that the school was hiring eight part-time teachers. Roger, her track-suited husband, stood next to her leaning on a piano, under a felt wall-hanging of the nativity scene. Trudy warned us that the traffic school, which had been founded by her and Roger, complied with all IRS regulations and obeyed court orders to garnish wages.

There isn't much to disqualify a person from becoming a traffic school instructor: 18 years of age and the ability to work legally in the United States are the job's basic requirements. Trudy did mention one touchy area: While applicants could have "points" on their license and still be hired, traffic school teachers cannot have had a drunk driving conviction within the last seven years. A man asked a complicated question about his eligibility for a position in the wake of a suspended sentence and completion of a "program." Trudy referred him to the *California Vehicle Code* for clarification on his situation.

Trudy gave way to Roger, who explained that each of us would come before the group, say a little about ourselves, and then tell a story related in some way to driving. Once we all had had a turn, he and Trudy would confer and make their picks. I have never been on an acting audition, but from what I've heard, it's similar to what went on in the church basement: The cattle call, the candidates (some talented, some hopeless) waiting their chance, the test, and then the split second ruling on something barely worthwhile in the first place.

A man of about 50 said that he was a self-esteem counselor over the telephone and on the Internet. He told a confusing story about backing into a neighbor's mailbox, interrupting his narrative several times with bursts of nervous laughter.

An attractive young woman started well by striding to the front of the room and announcing that she was an actress. But then she fumbled, gasped, shook her head, said, "I can't do this," and sat down.

A man in his 30s, who wore tight jeans and a striped polo shirt, didn't tell a story about something that had happened to him; instead, he told a joke. It was about a woman who was a passenger in a cab and wished to use the driver's cell phone. The punch line involved a trio of misunderstandings surrounding the operation of the phone, paying for the call, and the role of the cabbie's penis in the transaction.

My Story: The Plunge

I didn't tell a story about driving as such, but my contribution did have an automotive component. In 1985, I was home from college for the summer and living at my parents' house in

Montreal, where I had a job cleaning swimming pools.

Just before Labor Day, I was in the suburb of Laval removing algae from the sides of one of my regular customer's pools. It was unseasonably cold and I was wearing a T-shirt, a flannel shirt, a lumber jacket, work boots and jeans. It was an acute and stubborn case of algae, and I needed to apply fierce pressure to the pole holding the pool brush. The weight on the pole was more, however, than the plastic nub at its center could take and it snapped, causing me to tumble forward into the pool.

It was a hideous and unbidden immersion. I surfaced, flailed around for a few seconds, and then tried to get out. My sodden jeans made it difficult for me to lift my leg over the rim of the pool, however, and as I swam to the ladder, I pondered an irony: in the heat of the summer I had often been tempted to take a dip while I performed my labors, but never did so as a perversely responsible streak precluded me from dropping the mask of pool cleaning professional. Now, fully clothed, I was paddling across a frigid algae laden pool.

I knocked on the customer's back door to collect payment. The lady of the house insisted that I come in, and while she fished for her checkbook, a small puddle formed around me on the kitchen floor. I wondered if she had seen my performance and, if not, wondered why I was dripping water on her linoleum. I felt the need to explain but couldn't find the words - these customers were Québécois *pure laine*, and while my French was decent, it was not up to the self deprecating banter I felt I needed to explain my falling into their pool. The woman finally produced the check. I apologized for the water on the floor. *Merci. A la prochaine.* Until next time.

The Villain in the Back Story

The check was made out to "*Piscine Neptune Pool*" which was owned by Murray, a newly minted law school grad. The company had two employees: Murray's younger brother, Todd, and me. Murray once wistfully mentioned that Todd occasionally experimented with cocaine, making him sound more like a chemistry major than someone with a drug problem. This experimentation predictably figured in the mysterious disappearance of a sum of Neptune money later that summer, an amount that in the interest of fairness was deducted equally from Todd's pay check and my own.

In the late spring, Murray and I worked together preparing pools for the upcoming season. We used a pump to suck stagnant brackish water through a three-inch diameter hose which we ran out to the street. In addition to the usual leaves, sticks, and tennis balls, occasionally we found the bloated carcass of a drowned squirrel or rat. Murray, an expert at age 25 in property law and jazz, established himself as a confident and friendly boss willing to get his hands dirty. That June he moved to Toronto to clerk for a law firm, effectively leaving me in charge of the pool cleaning operation. We spoke only occasionally over the course of the summer, but when we did, Murray was full of ideas for my stewardship of *Piscine Neptune Pool* in years to come.

Shortly after my September return to school in Kingston, Ontario, I received a letter from Murray. He owed me \$182, and his correspondence, which employed 14 numbered points and

stretched over two pages, outlined why he was not going to pay me. I was shocked: I'd thought he was my buddy, and now he was stiffing me. In fact, the money in question had been earned the *first* week of the summer and he had held onto it, an illegal practice I'd never thought to question. I responded to his letter with an even lengthier missive of my own, but received no answer. I then tried to take him to small claims court, but his varied stalling tactics and the two-and-a-half hour bus ride from Kingston to Toronto led me to drop the matter, the debt uncollected. Why was he doing this? Was it worth it to him for such a small amount of money? I really couldn't understand Murray's peculiar *Weltanschauung*; pondering it was like trying to fathom the customs of a remote tribe that marry their sisters or worship beetles. You understand the concrete reality, but don't get the metaphysic.

That was the last time I heard from Murray, although recently I read in our alma mater's alumni magazine that he has opened his own firm specializing in entertainment and contract law, is ecstatic over the birth of his second child, and invites old friends to contact him.

The Low Road Not Taken

When I realized that Murray was going to get away with cheating me out of \$182, I thought of numerous schemes to seek revenge, none of which I put into practice. Often in retrospect we regret doing something childish, wish we had "taken the high road," but in this case, I wish I had taken the low road.

If only I had known then about the particularly delicious scheme I saw executed in 1997 while working as an English as a Second Language teacher for a small school in the Koreatown section of Los Angeles. The word "school" is really far too grand: The six small makeshift classrooms were located above a travel agency and locksmith in an unheated building whose roof leaked. The students were of varying ages and exclusively Korean, with the exception of one student from Guinea who was very black and spoke Mandingo.

The school's teachers were surprisingly good given the low wages, lousy conditions, and complete absence of any training or support. But this made little difference to the proprietor, a sourpuss named Mrs. Park. I had at first reserved judgment about Mrs. Park because many Koreans don't feel comfortable speaking English, and don't share Americans' love of small talk; this can wrongly be interpreted as rudeness. But I soon learned that Mrs. Park was not disagreeable due to some cultural or linguistic barrier, she was by nature difficult. Hae-Jin, my friend and fellow teacher, told me that amongst the Korean speaking teachers, Mrs. Park's nickname was "*bem*," or snake, and that not only the teachers, but also the students, disliked her and could tell that the school was nothing more than a cynical cash grab.

The best policy with Mrs. Park was to steer clear and not ask questions, make comments, or offer suggestions. Encounters weren't entirely avoidable, however, and I'd once been subject to a torrent of screamed Korean and English about the inappropriateness of an intern she'd assigned me teaching a class for twenty minutes.

My stoicism in the face of Mrs. Park was not shared by Max, a fellow teacher who had been at the school much longer than had I. Several days after having given his notice, he crafted a prank

both delicious and diabolical. Max called the *Recycler*, a massive publication of classified ads in which one can buy and sell everything from vintage Barbies to outboard motors, and placed a bogus ad in the section that listed items for give away. He advertised a houseful of free furniture and provided Mrs. Park's name and the school's telephone number. By nine AM the day the ad appeared, the phone was ringing continuously. After the third or fourth call, Mrs. Park had become completely unglued and was yelling into the receiver, "SCHOOL. NO FURNITURE! NO MORE CALL!" Many of the callers didn't speak much English themselves, and after the "School, no furniture" response, would come a pause and then, "COUCH NO!" and the receiver being slammed down. As Mrs. Park fielded these inquiries, Max lingered by the photocopier nearby so that he could soak up as much of her agony as possible.

The Driving Component

Of course, I couldn't put the check made out to "*Piscine Neptune Pool*" in my waterlogged wallet, so I held it gingerly at its edges as I closed the customer's back gate. I got into the car, turned up the heat, and headed down a dreary Laval boulevard towards the autoroute. Laval is a big suburb, Montreal's San Fernando Valley, lacking palm trees but with the requisite fast food chains and used car dealerships. I was stopped at a red light when a pick-up rear-ended me. It wasn't a serious impact, but was enough of a jolt that we pulled over and looked at the damage. When somebody rear-ends you while you're stopped, you don't owe them an explanation, yet I felt the urge to justify myself, to explain why I was damply emerging from my parents' Subaru. But again not trusting my French, or myself, I said little and wrote down the man's information, assuring him, "*Ce n'est pas grand chose*"; it's no big deal.

That was my driving story: I fell into a swimming pool fully clothed and while driving home was rear ended. I embellished it for the traffic school crowd by saying that I'd removed my wet clothes once I'd gotten in the car, so that when I got out to inspect the damage I was wearing only my boxer shorts. It was an easy laugh. I told the story effectively, and although the driving component of my tale was not large, the point of the exercise was clearly to see how you perform in front of a crowd. After we had all told our stories, there was a break for twenty minutes and then we were called back in. Roger advised, "If I don't call your name, it's likely because the geographical fit wasn't right - we try to hire people from the areas where we need teachers." I was to learn later that this was a lie, but it didn't matter; Roger read my name, I was in.

The Long Road to the Classroom

It was already noon, but Roger told us fresh recruits that there was no time for lunch and that we wouldn't be leaving until at least mid-afternoon. He produced some packets of cheese and crackers (borrowed he said from a network of vending machines he owned) for us to snack on. While we ate, Trudy gave us photocopies and Roger expounded upon his theories about driving, education (he and Trudy had been high school teachers for many years before opening the school), and human nature, which he said was a funny thing.

Roger told us to be animated and witty in our classes, but to exercise good judgment. At all costs we were to stay away from "anything racial or sexual," and he held up the example of the man who had told the joke about the cab driver's cell phone as an example of what *not* to do. The

road to becoming an instructor was not easy: We would have to observe an eight-hour class, study the *California Vehicle Code*, pass a DMV Traffic Violator School Instructor's test, and watch six hours of videos before we could even pick up our materials to begin teaching. Roger added that if we passed the test on our first attempt, we would have half of its \$73 cost refunded by the school, and could start teaching in as little as two weeks. Regardless, we would be paid only per class hour taught, and should not expect to see any money until after our first teaching assignment. I left the church basement at three, six hours after my arrival. I was tired and hungry, and thought that Roger and Trudy were a pleasant but shrewd couple.

The DMV exam for traffic school teachers was longer and more difficult than the standard written driving test. It consisted of one hundred multiple-choice questions; a score of 80 constituting a passing grade. In addition to the rules of the road, there were questions that applied particularly to traffic violator schools, but the test was much like the regular exam in that the questions veered erratically between the ridiculously obscure and the completely obvious. I studied and got an 84, a solid pass, although I was to find subsequently that my greatest weakness as an instructor was not running out of material, failing to keep students' interest, or incorrectly completing the paperwork, but rather my mediocre command of the subject matter.

My trip to the DMV for the exam provided me another driving related anecdote to share before a group, should I ever need one. Before setting off, I had put oil in my Geo Metro, but had neglected to replace the oil cap; by the time I rolled into the DMV parking lot, a black ooze was dribbling down the front bumper, and the spilled oil was burning, causing smoke to billow out from under the car's hood. My first move upon learning that I was qualified to teach traffic school (I received my result immediately) was not a celebratory drink, but a trip to Pep Boys for an oil cap.

A Student of the Auto Culture

The institution of traffic school is odd; I never could have imagined such a thing if it didn't already exist. It's like dinner theater or drive-in movies: what large mind could ever have conceived such a thing, gotten that far outside the box?

Traffic schools in California are not government run, and while they must register with the state and comply with some fairly exacting rules, they can market themselves as they wish. For this reason, there are a number of comedy traffic schools (few of which are funny), as well as classes catering to chocolate lovers, singles, and pizza enthusiasts. The school I worked for had three different arms: pizza, comedy and cheap prices. All had different names and phone numbers, but all were run from the same strip mall in the San Fernando Valley. The principle I'm sure is the same as that of large beer or soap companies with many different brands: It's harder for a newcomer to grab a decent share of the market if they enter a crowded playing field. In my case, it was to vary from week to week whether I was teaching a "cheap," "comedy," or "pizza" class; sometimes it was some combination of the three.

I was required to observe a class as part of my training. This was not, however, my first exposure to traffic school – I had been a student at one ten years before, the result of an ill advised right turn from the center lane. I recall nothing of the content of that class, but I do remember the

instructor quite vividly.

The class met over the course of two evenings at a Jamaican restaurant. Lianne, the teacher, was an aspiring television writer in her early 30s. She had grown up in Chicago, her parents were British, and her father was a doctor. Apparently, he had come to the States to escape what she described as the horrors of British National Health. The traffic school class was really just a framework over which she laid her life story. I was to borrow her approach a decade later in my own traffic school teaching: a modified Zen orientation that collapses the separation between course material and instructor. As teacher, you and your experiences make up the course, you don't teach the class so much as you *are* the class.

Lianne was not above using her position as an instructor to do a bit of networking, and she shamelessly pandered to a 50ish man who was an accountant for a movie mogul. I overheard her at the break ask him if he could get a script of hers to the man himself. I think I now understand the hunger she had; she likely thought, *I don't care if I'm pushy, too bad, I've got to get this shit out there. I've paid my dues, and here I am teaching traffic school.*

In the Trenches

The first class I taught met at a Best Western at the confluence of several freeways in Norwalk, an aggressively bland post-war suburb southeast of Los Angeles. The class began at eight AM and the students were told to report at 7:45. At 7:30, as I was unloading the TV, VCR, and laminated cards from my car, early birds were already in the parking lot clutching their court papers and asking questions. Once I'd checked in at the front desk and found the room, I set up the school's small Zenith and antiquated top loading VCR, put signs on the walls (the traffic school regulators are very strict that signs identifying the school be displayed), and placed masonite writing surfaces on the chairs.

To alleviate students' restlessness and boredom while waiting for class to begin, the school provides teachers with a 15-minute warm-up video of humorous snippets culled from sitcoms, movies, and cartoons on the subject of driving. I put the tape in and was delighted with the results: *Candid Camera*, *I Love Lucy* and *Bugs Bunny* transported the bored, restless pupils to a place of safety and comfort.

Getting the class to participate was easy; everyone has been in an accident, gotten a ticket, or had a problem with insurance, car mechanics, or the DMV. The average person in Los Angeles devotes a stunning portion of their time to driving and finding parking, as well as to tasks surrounding the buying, selling, insuring, cleaning and maintaining of automobiles. As one might expect, a few individuals came to dominate the anecdote sharing, and this produced groans from the less effusive members of the class congregated at the back. In the half-hour before lunch, attention began to flag and so we played traffic school Family Feud. The competition was good natured but intense, with one side objecting to how easy the other team's questions were. Late in the game, there was a dispute that I couldn't quite seem to make right, and so before bad feelings erupted, I declared the match a draw and mollified the competitors by noting that we would be cutting into our lunch time if we spent any more time arguing.

This was a "pizza" class, which meant the students were entitled to two free slices with their driving instruction. During our morning break, I called a nearby Shakey's to place the order, and at lunch we all drove there and battled a birthday party and little league team for places to sit. Per instructions from traffic school HQ, I ordered two slices of pizza with one topping for each person. I made the executive decision of ordering pepperoni on one and mushroom on the other, knowing the confusion, bitterness, and hurt feelings that would result were I to open up the choice of pizza toppings to the group at large. Some students were quite pleased with their two free slices; others were disappointed, however, that sodas and the house specialty, "mojo potatoes," were not included.

A traffic school day is a long day. It consists of six hours and 40 minutes of instruction plus two ten-minute breaks and an hour for lunch. Of course, this does not include the time spent doing things other than teaching, and it's like being a camp counselor or elementary school teacher in that there is no down time; the charges must be supervised at all times and there are numerous ancillary tasks to be attended to. When I was not in front of the class, I was setting-up or breaking-down the room, completing certificates, collecting money, or complaining to the front desk about the failing air conditioning. I also ordered, paid for, and oversaw the distribution of food. When I got home, I filled out paperwork and the next day I deposited the money at the bank and mailed in the attendance forms, list of certificates issued, and bank deposit receipt. After taxes, and including the four dollar bonus I received for mailing in the paperwork within 48 hours, I received \$96 for ten hours of work; this did not include, of course, the hour and a half spent getting to and from the job site.

Spinning Wheels

Three months after my performance in which I described my swimming pool plunge and subsequent fender bender, I tendered my resignation. I wasn't quite sure why I was quitting: Was it because I wasn't getting enough work—assignments were sporadic and sometimes got canceled—or was it too much work given my various other similarly half-assed gigs? I taught a total of four classes, one of which was the subject of a random audit by the Department of Motor Vehicles. I could see that if one kept at it, things would become easier, the work more consistent and the teaching venues closer to home. And of course, it did pay \$96, which was, well, \$96, even if that was for the complete surrender of a weekend day. But I'd had enough. Anthony, who worked for Trudy and Roger scheduling teachers, took my resignation in stride, even telling me that I could come back some day if I wanted to.

It's still scary to calculate the total time, relative to the very modest remuneration I received, that I invested in the California Traffic School. I'd really rather not, preferring to relegate this depressing arithmetic to the back seat of my mind where it can keep company Lianne, Mrs. Park, Murray and the various other hitchhikers I've taken on. The strange thing is that for someone with an ambivalent relationship to the car culture, this was the second job I'd had directly related to driving. A few years previous, I'd been a claims adjuster for a rental car company, haggling with plaintiff attorneys over how much their sore necked clients should get for the violent rear end collision they sustained in the McDonald's drive-thru. I did that dutifully for two-and-half years and then quit. And here I was again, getting off the freeway before my destination. But what was my destination? And why did I keep getting in cars with these strange people?

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