

Excerpts from Chapter 14, “What I’m Feelin’ Like, Dad Is to Borrow the Car Keys”

HIS FATHER STILL: *A Parenting Memoir*

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Baby Boomers will recognize the title of this chapter as coming from the late Harry Chapin's song, "Cats In The Cradle," about a father who neglects his son, who then cannot make time for his father when he becomes a man. Most people, I think, regard the song as a warning to fathers to pay attention, but of course, for me now, the song most resonates through its reference to car keys, even if the lyric does evoke that long-ago era when most families had one car that teens had to borrow.

On the Monday morning after Thanksgiving 2007, just a week before the first anniversary of Reid's accident, I was driving to work, listening to the morning radio news, when the announcer said that Connecticut's Governor was forming a Teen Safe Driving Task Force to revise Connecticut's laws and try to reduce the recurring carnage on the State's roads. The report said that bereaved parents would be among those serving on the task force.

Having served on two task forces on housing laws, I am familiar with how things work at the state legislature. When I got to my office, I called my state senator and state representative, a friend who knows the Commissioner of Motor Vehicles, and a colleague who knows the Governor, and asked for their help in being appointed, which I was, a week later.

Our assigned task was to review the State's teen driving laws. As we proceeded, however, I relived how I trained Reid, how and when I controlled or suspended his driving, and why the car keys were available on the night of his accident. I learned new facts about teen driving and discovered that I had not been quite as well-informed a parent as I had thought.

In the late 1990s, Connecticut joined a growing list of states that adopted what are called "graduated driver's license" laws, or "GDLs." In essence, new drivers – generally across the country, fifteen-, sixteen-, and seventeen-year-olds – face a prescribed curriculum and a certain

number of required driving hours supervised by an instructor, parent, or guardian. After this learner's permit stage, GDLs prevent new drivers from having passengers until several months have elapsed and impose a night driving curfew, in the range of 9 p.m. to 1 a.m.. At age eighteen, these drivers graduate to an unrestricted adult license. Beyond these basics, however, the laws vary widely, from some rural, midwestern states in which fourteen-year-olds can obtain an unrestricted license after a few months of practice, to urbanized states like New Jersey that do not allow teens to take out even a learner's permit until they reach seventeen.

I learned that Connecticut in 2005-06 had one of the nation's more lenient laws, issuing licenses to teens as early as four months after their sixteenth birthdays, and after just twenty hours on the road and some classroom instruction about speeding and drunk driving. For the first three months of being licensed, Connecticut kids could carry as passengers only supervising drivers and immediate family, but after that, they could pile their friends into their cars. Connecticut's curfew was midnight. Anecdotally, including from Reid and his classmates, I heard that neither the Driver's Education instructors nor the students approached the lessons and classes with much seriousness.

As I dug into the mountain of information made available to Task Force members, I reviewed again and again what I was thinking when I let Reid drive. Reid's close friend Mike B. was a few months older, and his buddy Tom G. was a full year ahead. By early 2006, they both had licenses and cars. In January, Reid completed his learner's permit training and received his license. In lockstep with just about every other parent of a teen in our suburban town, my wife Ellen and I agreed to consider letting Reid buy a used car.

While taking Driver's Ed, Reid showed himself to me to be an alert, coordinated driver. During the previous summer, I took him out on the lightly-traveled back roads of eastern Connecticut. I reviewed the State's recommended list of skills and situations to be taught to new drivers, and we spent time on each one. We practiced evasive maneuvers in the empty parking lot of a state park early on a Sunday morning.

To his credit, Reid had saved enough money to buy a passable used car; this was money he had received at the holidays and birthdays and from his summer jobs and his child care job at our church. Thus, Ellen and I considered a car in part because, except for insurance and a modest allowance for gas, he would be paying for it.

In addition to these acknowledged considerations, there were subliminal influences. Reid was enrolled in a private school that draws students from across central Connecticut. His best friend Tom lived four towns distant, forty minutes each way. His school was automobile-dependent.

That Connecticut had adopted GDL requirements was comforting. I assumed that the legislature, the Department of Motor Vehicles, and the police had gotten together to formulate sensible rules that, if Reid followed, would keep him safe.

Finally, I cannot deny – nor, I think, can any busy parent – that having my son drive was alluringly convenient for Ellen and me, living as we do in a suburban community in which walking is usually not an option. Reid getting his license provided an extra pick-up and delivery service.

Within Reid's price range we found a suitable car, a seven-year-old Volvo with two front airbags and steel girders in each door that would protect him from a side impact. I liked the fact that it was not a "cool" car, but a clunky, functional one. Reid would not be able to preen while driving this metal box. And while the interior was frayed at its edges, the overall vehicle gave the appearance of safety.

Ellen and I overlaid our own rules on state law. We were to know his destinations and his whereabouts at all times. Like all of his friends, he had a cellphone and he was under orders to check in. We made it clear time and again that driving was a privilege and not a right and that our rules would be modified as needed based on particular circumstances, such as our judgment that he had not gotten enough sleep. Reid came to understand that when he arrived home, I would be waiting for him and would conduct my own interrogation and check for coherence and sobriety, which I did every time he came home. On a few occasions when he missed his curfew,

I confiscated his keys. Although I don't recall discussing it overtly with Reid, I think he also understood that I was regularly inspecting every nook and crevice in his car – just like his room – and I was keeping an eye on his mileage.

So, on these bases, Ellen and I entered into what seemed to be a typical arrangement for a teenage driver, which was that we would pay for the insurance and maintenance and provide a modest, set amount for gas each week (roughly, to and from school each day), but beyond that he was on his own.

Of course, I wondered at times if I was making a deal with the devil, but at the time it felt undeniably mainstream. Maybe I rationalized in response to Reid's articulation of the peer pressure to which he was clearly subject, but I also recall thinking that I was creating a new form of leverage in our father-son relationship: study and do your chores and be respectful, or your keys are gone.

As I let the tether out on Reid's driving – longer periods in the car by himself, longer distances, driving at night or in bad weather – I relived my own driving experience and I wondered if I had inadvertently conveyed any bad habits to my son. My education as a driver was quite different from Reid's. Growing up in New York City in the early 1970s, with public transportation so available and parking spaces so hard to come by, I was content to wait and I did not get my license until I was eighteen and a car until I was twenty. My on-the-road training occurred almost exclusively in the summer on the rural roads of eastern Connecticut, which hardly prepared me to drive in traffic, must less in Manhattan.

When I was in graduate school, I experienced my first close call. I was driving my spanky, bright orange '73 Dodge from Brooklyn to Boston, midday on a weekday. On Interstate 95 North just outside of Providence, a man standing next to a minivan parked in the right-side breakdown lane pulled open the driver's-side sliding door – and out jumped a Great Dane. Suddenly, this enormous dog was twenty yards in front of me. I swerved to avoid the dog, jammed the brakes, and completed two 360-degree spins in the center of the highway.

It was a miracle that I did not hit anything, and I was lucky that the eighteen wheeler behind me was far enough back that its driver was able to slow down before he got to where my car came to rest. I do not remember much more, except that even though I was shaking, the police judged that my car was intact and I could continue on.

In 1998, I was stopped at a light in the west end of Hartford when a car hit my Volkswagen Passat squarely from behind with enough force to push it into a busy intersection. Had it not been late evening, I might well have been pushed directly in front of traffic coming from my left. Then the guy who hit me sped off. I got his license plate, as did the driver in the next lane. To make a long story short, the driver who hit me was a young man who had as his passenger a woman who should not have been in his car. I have an idea as to why he was not paying attention. I was outraged, and the man eventually paid some kind of fine, but a prosecutor talked me out of pursuing criminal charges.

Otherwise, in thirty-four years of driving, I had one fender-bender (a tree jumped into my path as I was backing up in a parking lot) and received two speeding tickets. I always wear my seat belt and insist that my passengers do the same. Since Connecticut in 2006 banned cellphones while driving, I have complied, using only an earpiece. I do not read or answer email or text-message while driving. My vice is a tendency to not come to a complete stop at a stop sign, but I'm working on that.

Did I instill in Reid any bad habits? He was a skillful driver – alert, calm, coordinated, with a good sense of the position of the vehicle on the road. I do not recall fearing that he would clip another car's mirrors or graze something on the side of the road.

As the months rolled on in 2006, I gave him more solo time, and thus less oversight. As parents must, I had to rely on him keeping me informed of his whereabouts while I watched what I could. No news became good news.

In April, when Reid had been licensed for three months, a West Hartford police officer pulled him over for a moving violation, changing two lanes without signaling. According to

Reid, the violation was questionable, and the fine was \$204. Reid paid it from his own savings account.

As the summer wore on, I became concerned about Reid revving the engine – it was the only way he could make his dowdy car seem cool. I was not particularly alarmed, but more concerned that he would rev the engine into an excessive speed and find himself with another expensive ticket. Sure enough, in late September, he was cited for driving 42 miles per hour in a 25 zone. Because this was his second moving violation before turning eighteen, he not only incurred a fine, but to keep his license he had to attend a driver retraining class at the DMV within the next ninety days. As mentioned earlier, he put it off and off and then signed up for the last possible day, which turned out to be December 2nd.

The other characteristic of Reid's driving months that I pondered while participating in the Teen Driving Task Force was the number of times I allowed him to take the car for the acknowledged purpose of "just hanging" with his friends. Particularly when school ended in June, and then on Friday and Saturday nights when it resumed in September, I allowed him to drive away, asking where he was going and when he would be home, but with less of an interrogation about his route, stopping points, or company. As he seemed to be increasingly capable of driving responsibly, I meted out additional freedom as a reward. He began to understand that complying with the curfew, the seat belt laws, the passenger restrictions, and the ban on cellphones, would result in more permission to drive. I was also heartened by my sense that Reid, deep down, was scared of enough things in life as to have a healthy self-preservation instinct; by no means was he a daredevil.

I suppose that subconsciously I appreciated that teenage drivers are inexperienced and that their brains, especially the part that appreciates risk, are not fully developed. Yet, I did not personally know any family that had lost a teenage driver in an accident; I had survived my teen years; I knew my son; I had trained him; and the State's laws would keep him safe.

Then, as noted, in December 2006, Reid lost control of his car, hit a guardrail, lost consciousness immediately, went into cardiac arrest, and was pronounced dead five hours later.

This is not the place for a dissertation on the national public safety crisis that is teen driving. Suffice it to say that in my first two months on the Task Force, I discovered through a mountain of statistics, analyses, and reports that teen driving is more dangerous than I appreciated, and that Connecticut's GDL laws were weaker than I had understood. I had allowed Reid to drive in situations that were much more perilous than I realized.

Because the police, insurance companies, and motor vehicle departments thoroughly document driving accidents, the amount of data available on teen drivers, both as a group and in comparison to other age brackets, is staggering. Of necessity as a Task Force member, but also from my desire to contribute substantially to its work, I began to read everything I could lay my hands on. In summary, my searing discoveries included these:

Driving is the leading cause of death of children in the United States;

About six thousand teens die every year in the U.S.;

Those teens take another two thousand or so people – passengers, drivers of other cars, pedestrians – with them;

Biological research has confirmed that the brains of teenagers are not close to being fully developed, and one part of the teen brain that is distinctly underdeveloped until the early twenties is the lobe that emits the chemicals that prompt fear and caution;

The first six months of teenage licensure are the deadliest;

Teenagers' driving skills are usually well-developed at the end of their learner's permit period, but deteriorate when they begin to drive unsupervised;

Crash rates for sixteen- to seventeen-year-olds are about three times higher than those of thirty-five to forty-nine-year-olds, the safest driving group;

When teen drivers have passengers, and thus distractions, crash rates are much higher;

The deadliest hours for teen drivers are the mid-afternoon after school lets out, and 11:00 p.m. to midnight; and

Cellphones, text messaging, and use of other distracting electronics are simply incompatible with safe driving.

Uncovering these lessons was not difficult; they virtually leapt from the reports.

Along with the statistics, we received behavioral studies. Several authors discussed the difference between "purposeful" and "recreational" driving. When teens have a reason – a job or sports practice, for example – to drive from Point A to Point B, crash rates are low. When, however, two or more teens pile into a car with no agenda or destination – cruising, joy rides, hanging out – crash rates rise. Other articles pointed out that speeding, not wearing seat belts, carrying passengers, and using cellphones are so-called baseline dangers that are then exacerbated by drugs, alcohol, bad weather, driving in an unfamiliar place, night driving, and driving high horsepower models.

As the Task Force worked, I studied the horror stories that periodically appeared in the news. Five teenage girls died in an SUV in upstate New York, with a suggestion that the driver had been text-messaging at the time of the crash. We heard testimony about the accidents in Bristol and Wolcott, Connecticut, including how and why the seventeen-year-old Wolcott driver, who had a DUI conviction, had been back on the road so soon, driving a high-performance car. We heard about an appalling game appearing on Facebook and MySpace: Teens push their speedometers as high as possible, take a photo with their cellphone of the dashboard to prove their speed, and then upload the photo onto their online profile.

At a Task Force public hearing, I met the family of one of the girls who had died in the Bristol accident. She had simply needed a ride home and took one from a nineteen-year-old going the same way. At the hearing, her parents and two younger siblings wore matching T-shirts bearing her picture. The sadness in their faces, six months after their loss, seemed permanent.

As I began to read and listen to facts and proposals for improving the laws, a question popped into my head and then repeated itself week after week, each time a bit louder and more tinged with disbelief: Why had I not learned all of this earlier? This was a maddening combination of outward – "Why didn't anyone tell me?" – and inward – "Why didn't I better

educate myself?" Why had I not been more conservative in my decisions about Reid's driving? Had I been seduced by the convenience of having another driver in the house?

None of this was made easier by my learning that, even though the experts have long documented the need for longer on-the-road training hours and stricter passenger restrictions than Connecticut's existing GDL laws, it was parents, anxious for the convenience of another driver in the household, who posed the principal obstacle to state legislators adopting what the research supported. It took a string of fatalities in 2006-07 and our Governor's leadership to effect change.

During the first six months of 2008, the Task Force became my focus – and near-obsession. In addition to research, subcommittee meetings, and Task Force sessions, I met and spoke at length with police, psychologists, doctors, nurses, prosecutors, judges, principals, driving instructors, social workers, traffic safety professionals, and of course other bereaved parents. We traveled to high schools across the state, appeared on statewide television, and were interviewed on regional radio.

As I began to comprehend the level of danger that these reports and statistics conveyed, it became apparent to me that the literature available to parents of teen drivers, including the government's and privately-published manuals, do not come close to conveying the magnitude of the actual risks. We require cigarette manufacturers to print on the box the specific diseases that smoking causes and a direct warning that smoking leads to death. When the staff of a hospital prepares a patient for serious surgery, half a dozen forms warn that death is a potential consequence. Driving literature, however, while mentioning the obvious need to be careful, simply does not highlight the worst case scenarios or death or specific circumstances that bring a higher risk. Why, I began to wonder, does the literature not say: "The Surgeon General has determined that teenage driving presents a high risk of serious injury or death"? Has someone concluded that parents won't read or heed the warnings, even if given?

As the Task Force's recommendations for stricter GDL requirements took shape, emails from both parents and students began pouring in to a website set up by the Department of Motor

Vehicles. While many parents expressed support for stricter GDL laws, the clear majority was opposed, and some were outraged. Typical of parent emails were these:

I don't want to see my children punished with severe restrictions just because they are teenagers.

It should be a parent's choice if they want their new driver to be in the car with another person. Another person makes the new driver better because they are another set of eyes.

Increasing the learner's permit hours is nothing more than grandstanding to make some kind of political point.

While the intention is to reduce the incidence of horrific accidents that maim or kill multiple teens, the fact is that teens need to rely on each other for transportation, and these laws would cause a huge inconvenience.

If teens cannot carry passengers then they are forced to drive alone, which wastes gas and money and puts more cars on the road, which is bad for air quality.

Teenagers have very busy lives.

The fact is that our children have to grow up, and to do that they have to make mistakes, and some of those mistakes will be fatal.

A teacher at a suburban high school had what I thought was a great idea that probably provided several lessons simultaneously. He assigned his Business class, thirty juniors and seniors, to write to the Task Force, expressing their opinions on our proposals. While a few described accidents, close calls, or excessive risk-taking by their peers and endorsed stricter rules, the predominant theory in their letters was that the learner's permit age should be rolled back to fourteen or fifteen – so when they turned sixteen, they would already be experienced drivers!

Without in any way belittling the input we received from the public, so important to our representative democracy, I must mention these two:

Newly-licensed drivers represent the four I's of danger: Inexperience, Invincibility, Idiocy, and Impressionability!

I am from the West. I have driven thousands of miles through California, Nevada, Oregon, Montana, and Idaho. I have driven in Florida and up and down the Eastern Seaboard. My last seven years driving in south-central Connecticut has presented the most challenging driving I have ever experienced.

And from a teenager who had obviously studied John Adams or Patrick Henry:

It simply amazes me that people think we need more laws placed on teenagers, who have no right to vote.

The Task Force reviewed a slew of proposals for change in addition to making the existing GDL requirements stricter. Place a sticker in the back window of vehicles being driven by teens, so police can identify them. Raise the minimum age to seventeen or eighteen. As positive reinforcement, give kids a green sticker in the window when they receive their licenses, but take it away if they commit a violation. Have the federal government prohibit automakers from building and selling cars that can exceed eighty miles per hour. Bar advertising that glorifies speeding and stunt driving. Build closed track facilities at which teens may drive at high speeds and cleanse themselves of their "need for speed" in a safe environment. Have high schools instruct kids on how to be safe passengers.

Within four months – a quickness rare in the world of public policy – the Task Force recommended, the Governor endorsed, and the legislature adopted, a doubling of the required hours during the learner's permit stage; an 11:00 p.m. curfew; a one-year prohibition on teen drivers transporting anyone other than parents, guardians, and siblings; mandatory license suspensions, starting at thirty days, for moving violations (instead of just monetary fines); faster court prosecutions; more prompt driver retraining sessions; a mandatory safety class for parents and guardians; and stricter seat belt laws. The Task Force convened in December 2007 and the bill was signed in April 2008.

After the Governor signed the bill before a bank of TV cameras and a crowd of legislators in the sun-splashed courtyard of Conard High School, I calculated the difference that Connecticut's new laws would have made in the life of my son. Had Connecticut's 2008 law been in effect in 2006, Reid would have had double the hours of required on-the-road training

while he had his learner's permit; Ellen and I would have attended a safety class with him; he would have passed a more rigorous written test about the rules of the road; his first moving violation (the double lane change) would have earned him a thirty-day license suspension; his second violation would have cost him his license for sixty days, plus a fine for license reinstatement; he would have taken his driver retraining class sooner; and eleven months into his licensing, he would not have been allowed to have passengers. The new laws put safety ahead of convenience.

As the Task Force wound down, I wrote an op-ed piece for the *New London Day* about my reflections on allowing Reid to drive. The editor gave it the title, "A Father's Awful Lesson."

I began:

The day my son, then sixteen and a half, graduated from his learner's permit to his driver's license was a day of achievement, independence, relief, and pride. Achievement because he had certifiably learned what Connecticut requires a teen to know in order to operate a car safely on the State's roads. Independence because he could now transport himself to school, activities, and friends' homes. Relief because I was now out from under being his chauffeur and he was now available to assist us with any chore that required driving. Pride because, well, as parents we revel in the accomplishments of our children, don't we?

And I concluded:

But I have learned that teen driving under the best circumstances is much riskier than I appreciated in 2006. Even in full compliance with Connecticut's laws as they exist today, teen driving is statistically, demonstrably dangerous. The independence, achievement, relief, and pride were seductions that masked the facts.

As a Task Force member, I have heard driving instructors talk about parents who yell at them when they advise that their teen is not ready to drive. I have heard parents say that their "system" is to make their kids follow State laws – and then pray. I've heard parents concede that their child got a ride from a teen whose age or license status they did not know. Seduction seems to be at work every day. We need to peel back that veil.

Could I have prevented Reid's death? Should I have hidden the keys? Parenting and driving experts, I suppose, could pick apart my actions and my ultimate conclusion, which is: I don't know. It does not seem to me that I made an egregious mistake, but it is also true that I did

not fully appreciate how dangerous teen driving is in the best of circumstances and how the risk escalates when a relatively new driver is out at night, with passengers, on an unfamiliar road, with no particular destination. I read all of the literature and consulted the mainstream sources that parents review; it is not as if I simply didn't get the memo. Percentages were on my side; Connecticut licenses about 36,000 new drivers per year, and in 2006, fourteen sixteen and seventeen-year-olds died while driving. The national figures present similar percentages: Approximately nine million teenagers are licensed to drive in the United States, and about six thousand of them die each year while at the wheel. Finally, I have explained before the maddening fact that after several 360-degree spins that could have proceeded in many different trajectories, Reid's car hit the guardrail at precisely the worst place.

My debate had no answer, no end, no conclusion, and no purpose.

At the final meeting of the Task Force, the Co-Chair asked if any members had final comments. We were on statewide television. I decided that this was my last best opportunity to repeat my new warning to parents about not compromising safety for convenience. So I raised my hand and started to speak. My eyes welled up, my heart started pounding, and the forceful message I had intended to deliver dribbled out, punctuated by chokes and sobs. I was embarrassed – until after the meeting when a few, kind fellow members surrounded me and told me that my emotion had added to the force of what I had said. Then they allowed me to bury my head in their shoulders, as what we had accomplished as a group was overtaken by a reminder of why we had done it.