Motorcycle Rider Mentality Could Save Your Life!

Shôn Ellerton, September 19, 2018

My personal experience of how motorcycle riding might have made me a safer driver

Just to be clear from the outset, I'm not advocating that motorcycle-riding is safe. Far from it, of course. You're a vulnerable little dot of living flesh riding amidst walls of moving machinery vying for its chance to reduce you to nothing more than a pile of minced meat. Keeping your eyes peeled for slippery manholes, diesel spills and craters the size of small quarries (at least in South Australia) is a daily ritual for all riders.

Now for those of you that are riders, I am already preaching to the converted, but you know well as I do that once you've been a motorcycle rider, deep down you will always be one as well. At least in spirit. I've not owned a bike during the last 10 years since my move to Australia from the UK, the last one being a beefy nice red Suzuki RF900R (pictured at top of article) styled with some similarity to the Ferrari Testarossa supercar, but from time to time, I manage to borrow or rent one to maintain some degree of riding skills.

What I am writing about is the *mentality* of motorcycle riding. Some of you may equate this mentality to what appears to be a bout of lunacy when several motorcycles overtake your car at lightning speed on a narrow twisty road allowing only a few inches either side for safe passage. However, this is the most common perspective from a 'non-rider' driver who just got passed, and quite rightly so. If you could don up the car driver who's got little or virtually no motorcycle experience with leathers and a helmet and ask him or her to do the

same thing; yes, I guess that could be classified as slightly lunatic. If I was suddenly asked to ride the Isle of Man TT circuit at racing speed on a Ducati, I agree, that would be near-suicidal. Look up *isle of man tt point of view* on Youtube and you'll know what I mean!

The most striking difference between *car driving mentality* and *motorcycle riding mentality* is this.

"Most car drivers believe they are better than other car drivers on the road whilst most motorcycle riders believe that there is always a need to keep improving their riding skills."

One obvious reason, of course, is that, if a rider collides into pretty much anything larger than a small cat, the consequences are often quite dire, particularly for those who choose not to wear proper motorcycle kit. Personally, I shudder and suck air through my teeth when I see a rider storming around on a sports bike clad only in shorts and not wearing gloves and boots. For this reason, motorcycle riders are *exceptionally* aware of their environment and are on high-alert and on high-adrenaline for much of the time, which, naturally makes motorcycle riding thrilling much as enjoying a rollercoaster ride at your local theme park. Virtually nothing goes unnoticed for a rider. Eye-to-eye contact with car drivers, never relying on mirrors, never assuming behaviours for other road users, and so on.

Another reason is that motorcycle riding is quite a skilled art. I learnt to ride a motorcycle from scratch at a fairly advanced age, around 35 years old, and honestly, I found it one of the toughest challenges especially on the bigger 500cc+ bikes. Every limb of your body is doing something quite differently and the delicacies of how one controls power, steering and braking to achieve balance and control, especially at slow speeds, is minute. After long periods of time without riding a motorcycle, there is no way I can confidently feel that I can suddenly jump on it and ride like I normally do and feel safe. Moreover, unlike your conventional car, there are often striking differences on how to ride different motorcycles however conventional they might be. I have to *ease* my way into it every time. This is in total contrast to jumping in a car where, for many, it is as

easy as riding a bicycle if a car hasn't been driven for some time especially by those who've lived in cities where owning or driving a car is simply not necessary or practical. It could be different for those who started to ride motorcycles when they were in their teens, but rest assured, all other riders I've spoken to agree with the above.

And lastly, a motorcycle rider usually has far more interest in how the motorcycle works than most car drivers. I have to confess that I sometimes leave it longer than I should before I check tyre pressures and oil levels on my car. I've been in several taxis in Adelaide when the engine warning light is perpetually on, usually the case of a loose timing chain that needs to be replaced yet the taxi drivers seem unperturbed stating that it's a costly repair and the car will probably be just fine. There are many car drivers who wouldn't be able to tell you how much pressure to put in the tyres or where the engine oil cap is. As all motorcycle riders know, the state of your bike can make a difference between life and death.

"If everyone drove their cars with the mentality of a motorcycle rider, the roads would be a far safer place"

To this day when I drive a car, I *always* physically turn my neck to look around for traffic having to never rely on rear and side-view mirrors. If I adopt the way that I observe my surroundings when riding a motorcycle to the way I drive my car, I notice that my driving is far less aggressive. Tailgating, impatience and distractions from what's happening *inside* the car is greatly reduced. If a car ahead of me is slow and I'm beginning to get impatient, one very useful tactic is to change your mental image of the 'perpetuator' behind the wheel of the car in front. Many of us tend to stereotype what kind of person that could be behind the wheel and we even start to blame the *car,* even the look of it. Thankfully, most car drivers give motorcycle riders in front quite a wide berth. Perhaps, it's because when you see a real body unprotected by a cocoon of metal, one can see just how frail life can be.