

No secrecy surrounds the facts illuminating accidents resulting from drunken driving. Alcohol is involved in more traffic deaths than any other single factor. Insurance companies, called upon to pay claims, and courts, duty-bound to mete out appropriate punishments, supply gruesome statistics that leave no doubt that drinking and driving are lethal partners.

If the drinking driver were the only person threatened, the public could, perhaps, afford to continue to shrug its collective shoulders and turn its back. The truth is, however, that anyone who drives a car or is a passenger in one may, whether or not he has been drinking himself, fall victim to another driver who is inebriated. Drunks behind steering wheels don't carry signs announcing their condition.

Why isn't something done about it? Possibly there is a combination of reasons. One might be that most drivers, at one time or another, have used their cars when they've had enough to drink to be legally intoxicated and have gotten away with it. No one was hurt; not even a scratched fender or dented bumper testified to the driver's impaired condition during his trip home from a party, bar, or cocktail lounge; if no harm came of it, what's wrong?

People have a strong tendency to forgive in others errors they make and sins they commit themselves. Even policemen can empathize with a driver who has had one too many. Judges are human, as well; there are times when they, too, may indulge, outside of the confines of their own homes, and then slip into their cars and drive. Juries are made up of people who share the same faults and weaknesses as the defendant charged with "driving under." It's the, "There, but for the Grace of God, go I," syndrome.

Alcohol is used, and its use is acceptable, at all levels of our society. While there do exist among us those who never touch the stuff, the teetotalers are a minority. Most people drink, and most people know that most people drink. And most people drive, too. Unhappily for the victims of the majority of traffic accidents, a lot of us drink and then go out and drive cars, and that's one big reason tragedy stalks our roads and highways.

Possession of a vivid imagination isn't necessary to realize how easily and quickly accidents can occur. Some happen even when no one involved is inebriated. When traveling at such moderate speeds as posted limits allow, a moment's distraction can cause an accident. Combine inattention with liquor and one minor emergency, and a major accident is the likely outcome.

Alcohol affects our perceptions and our judgments. No honest person who has ever sipped a glass of wine, guzzled a can of beer, or downed a shot of whiskey can deny that alcohol affects our systems, slows our reflexes, and changes our chemistry. That's the reason we use it. We don't drink alcohol because we're thirsty. Water, soft drinks, or fruit juice would slake our thirst. We drink alcohol because it relaxes us, eases our tensions, and at least temporarily, relieves our anxieties and depressions.

Alcohol also affects our judgment, our vision, and our ability to react to emergencies as adequately as we would were we entirely sober. When we've been drinking, we say things we wouldn't dream of saying, and do things we'd be too inhibited to do, without the alcohol that frees us from restraints.

Those sensations of release are the very feelings that make driving hazardous to ourselves and other people sharing the road with us. Virtually no one sets out, when accepting a drink, to harm anyone. There are few who drink socially, however, who never have drunk enough to be intoxicated. Grim statistics prove that intoxicated people do drive cars, do have accidents, do sometimes injure and sometimes even kill themselves and other people.

A day seldom passes that the media doesn't bring us the details. Four teenagers have been at a party, drinking beer. On the way home their car fails to negotiate a curve and hits a tree. Four young lives end abruptly, and four families are plunged into mourning. A youngster walking home from school is struck from behind by a speeding car driven by someone who had had a couple of extra ones for the road at the local tavern. The child is killed instantly. An elderly person, driving defensively, arouses angry impatience in an intoxicated motorist. Tossing caution out the window, the drunk attempts to pass the slow moving vehicle ahead; unexpectedly a third car pulls out from a side street. In the resulting three-car collision, five maimed bodies, including that of the careful older driver, are carted off to the hospital by the rescue squads.

Who is at fault? The careful driver whose behavior made the drinking driver impatient? The driver who entered from the side street? Or the person whose judgment was impaired? What can be done about drunken drivers? We could

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assign a policeman to every establishment with a liquor license and subject every departing driver to a breathalyzer test. Party-hosts could be held responsible for limiting the quantity their guests imbibe if the guest must drive away. We can restrict driving privileges, but unlicensed drunk drivers are not uncommon. We can impose heavy fines for driving while under the influence, but before we can fine drunk drivers we must identify them. We can jail people who drink, drive, and are involved in accidents, but we can't keep them locked up forever. Some of these remedies have been tried. Drunk driving is still commonplace.

Controlling the practice lies within our power without resort to law and legal punishments. The control lies within ourselves. Few of us who drink, even those who regularly drink too much to drive, commit other crimes while drunk. People may be more prone to argument after drinking, but only a comparatively few of them commit murder or even get into fights while intoxicated. Their inhibitions are not so masked that they allow themselves to become violent; socialization imposes controls that override the effect of alcohol. If this were not so, murderous violence would erupt more frequently at public drinking places and private parties. Since that's not a common occurrence, we may deduce that even while drunk, people can and do govern themselves.

The same controls that restrain drunks from making physical attacks upon others can be extended to driving cars after drinking. If we can control some of our actions, we can control any of them. If we were to instill the inhibition that driving after drinking is akin to murder, fewer drunks would drive cars.

Those of us who drink have an obligation to ourselves and to everyone else not to drive cars if we've been drinking. Or not to drink if we're going to drive. After a fatal accident, it's too late to say, "I shouldn't have been drinking."

Who among us wants to face the rest of life haunted by the ghost of someone who died because booze befuddled our brains?