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THE ESSAY » BY ANDREA FREEDMAN

Putting the brakes on my driver's licence

No amount of practice or lessons or learner's permits will make me a good driver. Is it time to park that dream?

It is a crisp fall day in 1982. I am sitting behind the wheel of my mother's blue, vinyl-topped Pontiac Ventura, my heart pounding and my hands sweating profusely. A strange, unsmiling man sits in the passenger seat beside me, judging my every move. I am 16, it is my driver's test and I am gripped with fear.

In the next horrific moments that followed, I froze and seemed to forget everything I had learned in driving class and during the few times I had coaxed my parents into taking me out to practise in their cars.

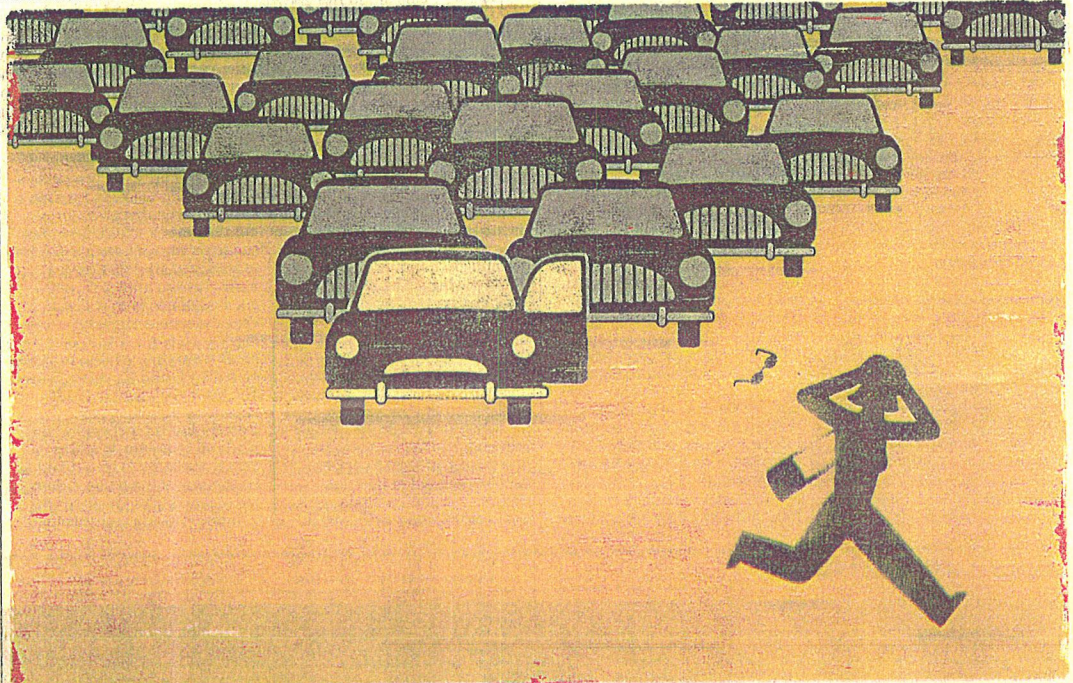
The nightmare began upon hearing the examiner's monotone voice say, "Oh God, you missed the street." After I had botched everything from parallel parking to lane changing and the test was almost finished, the examiner had the audacity to ask me to back into a spot in the parking lot of the driver examination centre. I tried several times without success and, finally, in sheer frustration, gave the wheel one last turn, hit the gas too hard and struck a parked car — though not hard enough to cause damage.

I was not given my driver's licence that day, nor was I successful on my second attempt or even my third the following year. After that, I kept booking and rebooking tests and subsequently cancelling, until the day my learner's permit expired. I made no attempt to renew it, telling myself that maybe I would give it another try in the future.

Years went by and I thought I had left the whole idea of driving behind me until, in a momentary lapse of judgment, at 40 I signed up for more driving lessons. My cousin, who was about to turn 30, decided it was high time she got her licence and convinced me to do the same. I joined the teenagers at the Ministry of Transportation eager to get their learner's permits in anticipation of driving. For months, I secretly met my driving instructor, not telling any of my friends. I could not risk a repeat performance of when I was a teenager and had to tell them I didn't pass the test yet again.

In spite of the hundreds of dollars I spent on lessons and the slight improvements I made over time, even the best teacher wasn't skilled enough to give me the confidence I needed to feel ready to book my driver's test.

Driving with my husband in between lessons was a disaster. What he tried to teach me was different from what I had



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learned with my instructor, leaving me confused and flustered. Every time I attempted to practise with him I ended up pulling over in tears and telling him to take the wheel. In a way, it was as if history was repeating itself.

No amount of practice or lessons or learner's permits will ever make me a good and confident driver. I told my husband he was partly to blame because after a while, the thought of driving with him made me so nervous that I was hesitant to practise.

But the truth is I don't think I'm cut out for driving. And what's more, I can live very nicely without it. Or at least I thought I was certain I could until I received a notice from the Ministry of Transportation, reminding me of the impending expiration of my learner's permit. With the clock ticking as my 45th birthday approaches, along with the last day when I will be legally allowed to attempt to drive with another licensed driver in the car, I have mixed emotions about renewing it again or forgetting the whole thing.

Since I first obtained my learner's permit, merely having the

picture identification, without necessarily having to use the driving privileges granted with it, made me feel that somehow I was part of the crowd. In a way it felt nice to have that licence in my wallet. Now, while part of me is sad to see it expire, quite possibly for the last time, I am not sure there is any real purpose in spending more money on something I will most likely never use. Perhaps it is time to accept the fact that I am never going to drive.

There are many positives that have come out of my not having driven all these years. I get a lot of exercise walking and I save money on gas, insurance and maintenance. And I have never had to be the designated driver.

I visualize myself driving on a nice day, picking up my grandmother to take her out for lunch. I also visualize myself daydreaming, as I am prone to do, and all of a sudden being stuck in the middle of an intersection, stunned until another car comes crashing into me. I can see myself cracking under pressure while being honked at by impatient drivers or, worse, being forced by fire trucks or police

cars to pull over to the right in an emergency. It is bad enough dealing with the downtown crowds as it is without adding irate drivers swearing at me.

It feels sad in a way but I have come to an acceptance. Driving is not for everyone and I am one of those people who are just as well off not getting behind the wheel, not to mention the other people on the road who are better off that I don't drive.

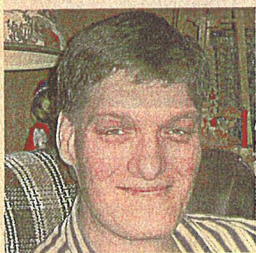
For a brief moment it felt good to hold the steering wheel. Perhaps, shortly after my 45th birthday and just before the deadline, I will renew my permit just one more time to see if I get behind the wheel even once over the next five years. If I don't, at least I will be able to carry it around in my wallet. I still have time to think about it. In the meantime, I'd rather have a stiff drink and call a cab.

Andrea Freedman lives in Toronto.

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LIVES LIVED



Ralph Peter Metzke

Son, brother, uncle, friend, Christian, optimist, outdoorsman, gentle giant. Born Dec. 14, 1964, in St. Catharines, Ont. Died April 20, 2011, in Hamilton.

Ralph Metzke's heart was weakening during the fall of 2010. He was pragmatic and laughed about it, saying he had medication and lived one day at a time. He kept working and doing hobbies: competitive shooting, fishing and flying model airplanes. In earlier years, he was an avid hunter and snowmobiler and took ultralight flying lessons.

Ralph exemplified the "cup is half full" way of thinking. His cup was more than filled by his unshakable faith in God. In school his friends challenged him but didn't change his beliefs; instead he took them to evangelical events. He prayed anywhere and any time he needed to consult

tumour discovered in adolescence and several close calls as a result. He had scoliosis and endured a lot of pain, but exhibited a sunny disposition and unassuming manner.

An engaging storyteller, Ralph described his adventures and inventions at length. A couple of days before he died, he dreamed he was light and fast and could run and jump in the air like a child. He said it was fantastic.

One of two children of Peter and Rosemarie Metzke, Ralph went to school in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., where he lived. Classmates remember him as a fluent German speaker, a trumpet player and the smiley, happy-go-lucky

Another day Ralph skipped school and, feeling chatty, got on his citizens' band radio at home. By chance, he struck up a long conversation on the CB with the teacher whose class he was skipping. With an amazed class listening in, he opened a pop can beside the microphone. He said he was having a beer.

Ralph earned a diploma in mechanical engineering technology from Niagara College as a mature student. He had huge hands with great dexterity and an innate mechanical feel. Many times he helped troubleshoot the quirks of friends' motorcycles and cars. For work, he once designed and built from scratch an industrial clean-

During a cottage expedition a few winters ago, we crossed the ice on the Severn River. Ralph charged ahead on his ATV, trying to plow through a snow bank, but there was a rock ledge hidden underneath. His ATV stopped dead with a crash and threw him forward onto the handlebars. Ralph must have been in pain but he laughed off the accident and got around the obstacle. Then he went ice fishing.

By William Tremain, Ralph's friend, and Peter and Rosemarie Metzke, Ralph's parents.

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