

A bulldozer, an oyster, or a dandelion?



Mi Ae Lipe
mlipe@roundel.org

Regardless of what kind of driver you generally are, one thing is absolutely certain: You have been all three at some point in your life, or even on the same day.

In case you haven't noticed, the road is a fascinating place. Nowhere else in our daily life do we encounter such a microcosm of human foibles right before our eyes. And yet, huge cooperation and tolerance exist, too—even if those noble traits aren't always obvious. On a typical crowded road, the very fact that so many drivers from different cultures, ages, levels of experience, personalities, and motivations can dart about on a tiny area of concrete and not cause sheer chaos most of the time is quite wondrous, if you really stop and think about it.

Social pressure plays a huge role in traffic. Driving is a metaphor for how we go through life, and the way we act behind the wheel directly reflects our ego, habits, life values, planning abilities, confidence levels, and social skills. We all like to think of ourselves as above-average drivers, but truly honest self-reflection can be quite humbling.

We've all felt violated on the highway by tailgaters—nasty people who appear in our rear-view mirrors much faster than we ever thought possible and remain stubbornly glued to our bumpers. If a tailgater is riding your *derrière*, you have two choices: You can move over, or remain where you are. How you see this situation and respond to it depends on whether you're the bulldozer that plows slower people out of the way, the oyster who stays planted and minds its own business, or the dandelion seed that drifts at the mercy of others. If you're a bulldozer, dandelion seeds and open roads are ideal; they validate your status. Why are you a bulldozer? Is it for a valid reason? Are you a doctor rushing to the hospital to operate on a patient waiting in the emergency room, or is there a pregnant woman in the car about to drop a baby in the parking lot of the nearest Dairy Queen if you don't tromp on it?

Or do you just want to go faster than other drivers? Why—are they truly too slow? Or are you merely accustomed to making quicker progress than everyone else? (That's a valid point in some situations.) And it's likely that you get angry or at least annoyed a lot. Maybe you even indulge in road rage once in a while. Have you ever honked at or flipped off someone?

But why do you want to be faster? Is your speed unsafe for conditions? Do you overly fixate on the oyster or dandelion directly in front of you, and ignore your peripheral vision? Do you think the oysters are the unsafe ones, holding everyone else up? Maybe they are—but your speed, tunnel vision, and tight following distance are also increasing everyone's risk.

Consider the oyster, as food writer M. F. K. Fisher would say. If you happen to be an oblivious

one who hangs out in the left lane and lets traffic stack up behind you when the law says that you should move over to the right to let others go by, consider why. Do you just prefer to take life easier and not hurry? Are you uncomfortable going as fast as everyone else because you think it's unsafe, or you don't want to get a speeding ticket? Or do you stay left because there's less traffic in that lane, so it feels safer? Do you even realize that others might be waiting (and seething) behind you?

Regardless of your reasons, doubtless you feel vulnerable, intimidated, annoyed, or downright upset at times. Who are all these bastard bulldozers who want to push me out of the way? Or maybe you think, *I have a perfect right to be here. It's my road, too.*

And then there are dandelions, floating around and pushed along by everyone else. If you're a dandelion, your greatest fantasy might be a road free of oysters and bulldozers, where you can just go at your own whimsical pace. Sometimes you're not the most attentive driver on the road, and you speed up and slow down randomly, much to others' dismay. But dandelions can also be some of the most observant and predictable drivers around, making the road safer for everyone with their willingness to move around oysters and stay out of the path of bulldozers.

Regardless of what kind of driver you generally are, one thing is absolutely certain: You have been all three at some point in your life, or even on the same day. The most easygoing dandelion has turned into a bulldozer when faced with an especially stubborn oyster. The most hardcore bulldozer can be run out of the lane, because someone always wants to go faster. And oysters easily become dandelions because someone is always going slower.

This leads us to a fascinating quirk: We're all critical of other drivers, but we turn remarkably blind eyes to our own faults, even if we ourselves display the very weaknesses we love to point out in others. Funny how that works—but consider it the next time you're on the road and someone literally drives you crazy. We often paint ourselves as victims, but not perpetrators, because it's far easier to judge and complain than to just buck up.

Many drivers justify speed by saying they need to keep up with traffic. But here's the twist: Humans are social. We copy others, whether we're aware of it or not. If you speed, you embolden others to do the same, and everyone starts going faster. If you drive slower, your calmer manner sets an example for others to follow—literally—and overall speeds drop. Not everyone falls in line, but you'd be surprised at how often you can effect positive change this way. Be that change.