A.P.O.V.*

*Alumni Point of View

Distress Signal

A momentary driving lapse throws a maligned era into sharp relief.

By Ray Waddle, MA'81

Recently, I became one of *those* people—a driver who leaves his turn signal blinking for miles and miles on the interstate without knowing it.

I'd been uncharitable about such motorists for years. They were a public menace, a plague of the clueless, a symbol of things gone wrong in the new millennium.

And now I've become one of them. On Thursday I drove 18 miles before realizing my left blinker was still going. It didn't cause a car wreck or a hazmat spill, but still I added to the national deficit — the deficit of attention and alertness to the bigger world beyond my bleating little dashboard.

DANIEL DUBOIS

When I finally noticed it, I did the adult thing: I blamed others. Blamed the manufacturer for making turn signals you can barely hear anymore. Blamed 21st-century life for releasing toxic levels of stress into my day and causing such unseemly road-weary self-absorption. I was ready to sue.

Maybe I should admit I had a hand in this automotive autism. I had the CD player turned up too loud to hear the turn signal. The music was from 30 years ago — Frank Zappa, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, a stash of bands I hadn't visited since gasoline was 79.9 cents a gallon.

The truth is, I neglected the blinker because I was distracted by an alarming new feeling: I was nostalgic for the '70s.

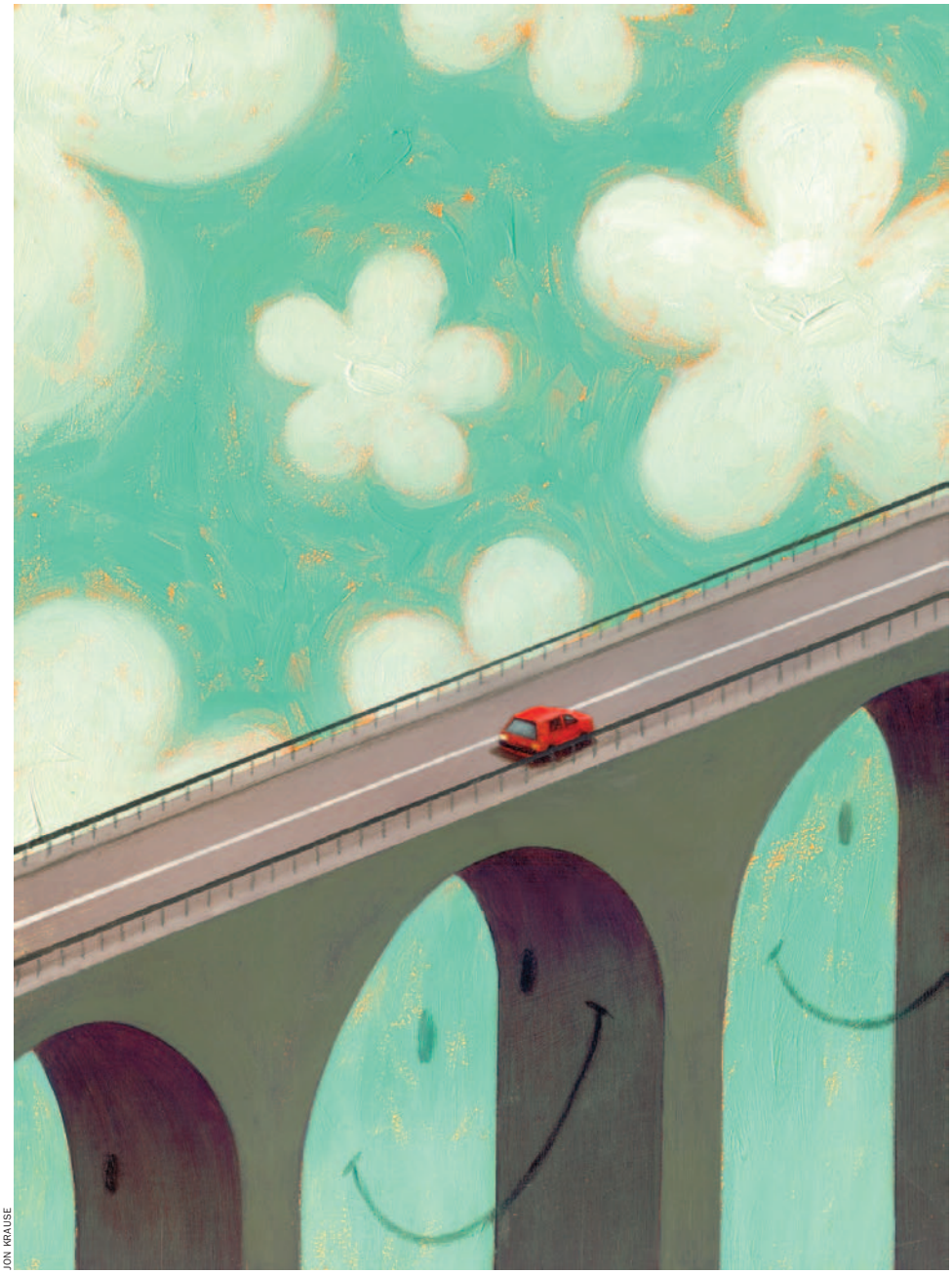
I hated the '70s when they were happening. They were unambitious, tacky, underachieving. Everybody knew that, even at the time. It was odd to realize in 1973 that your decade already could be summed up and dismissed as a garish mistake, a 10-year maximum-insecurity prison term with no parole. It seemed the '70s were a post-'60s hangover with no Excedrin in the cupboard.

Now, on a crowded highway in 2004, my millennial mind was merging onto unfamiliar ground: forgiveness. Yes, the '70s were burdened with disco, stagflation, Haldeman-Erlichman, Chuck Barris, Pintos, Vegas, Bobby Riggs, and entirely too much Chablis. But the decade also was innocently free of corporate sponsorship, spam, Hummers, chads, postmodernism, junk mail, Lewinsky, global warming, reality TV, baseball free agency, O.J. in the Bronco, and anthrax in the mail. There were no cell-phone numbers to memorize. Paris Hilton was a ritzy building, not a glitzy blonde. The only terrorists were a half-dozen hairy, left-wing Europeans. CEO salaries and food portions were human scale. Muhammad Ali was still stylishly rope-a-doping to victory. President Carter's press-conference mastery of technical details was a pleasure to watch. No one was buying "the complete idiot's guide" to anything yet.

I recall no random, pointless blinking turn signals on the American turnpikes of the 1970s. We wore indestructible perma-press shirts and knew the sedated lyrics of Leo Sayer, but we had our wits about us: We maintained dashboard control. Road rage and murderous SUVs would become proud symbols of the enlightened future, not the '70s. Public life, even after Watergate, was still a place approximating etiquette and purpose — no swearing on the airwaves, no S&L swindles, no culture wars, no TV roundtable left-right smackdowns, no Super Bowl half-time wardrobe malfunctions, or other exotic fruits of deregulated capitalism.

People in the '70s actually talked about solar energy, oil conservation and clean air. We had to. The decade's two big energy scares kept reality well within view. Our dependence on imported oil was 33 percent in 1975. That seemed like a lot. It triggered new thinking about windmill technology and mass transit. Now it's 60 percent.

This is what I was thinking about when I neglected my blinking left-turn signal for 18 miles along the city's interstate route



JON KRAUSE

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on an ordinary weekday, listening to the guitar intricacies of Zappa and recalling with fondness the stumbling decencies of President Gerald Ford.

I see now I was sending out an SOS with my errant blinker, warning other motorists of my helpless fog of cultural dissonance, asking for a little time to myself, at 55 mph, until the moment could pass and I could rejoin our furious shock-and-awe century, where we are more dependent on hostile foreign oil than ever before and no one asks why.

The '70s now seem wise and sane, even saintly, a gadgetless era of regular savings accounts and regular churchgoing. The '70s will surely one day be canonized by some sanctified world court of calendars, cited as the last moment of measurable calm before the dawning noisy era of faxes, junk bonds, MTV, hostile takeovers, McLaughlin Group and tall desserts — that is, the '80s.

Alas, it's not so simple. Nostalgia won't do. It never works. It's a scam. For one thing, nostalgia is committed to negating the splendors of the present moment — the Internet, Saturday college football on 20 cable channels, coffeehouses, DVDs, pay-at-the-pump gas, telecommuting, zinc lozenges, "Prairie Home Companion," and the mute button on the remote. Did I mention the Internet?

Worse, nostalgia dulls the brain to the urgencies of what needs tending now — things like Mideast justice, literacy, affordable health insurance and, yes, fuel efficiency. Ignore these matters, and 30 years from now the burning mess will make us pine in stunned nostalgia even for the unpromising lost decade of the 2000s.

So I acknowledge my extreme makeover of the '70s shouldn't fool anyone for long.

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at a remote, empty road, I faced south, beyond the horizon, where the desert winds had surely swept away our first timorous steps. Reflecting on all we had accomplished—1,700 miles of trail and more than $10,000 in donations—I knew the real task still lay ahead. On Oct. 9, Josh and I will lead the 2005 Nashville AIDS Walk downtown at the Bicentennial Capitol Mall State Park. We showed how far we would go for HIV. Can we now get others to step forward, too?

To see photos and to learn more about Hike for HIV, please visit www.hikeforhiv.com.

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That still leaves us pondering the contagion of motorists with their cry-wolf turn signals. What to do? Pass around them? But they might indeed be preparing to switch lanes, for once. Send them a message? I've considered painting a sign to flash out the window. But what would it say? "Please turn off your turn signal" strikes a polite tone, but it's too wordy at interstate speeds. "Check blinker!" is too abrupt and presumptuous. "Wake up! Now!" carries cryptic, unintended metaphysical undertones. Maybe we should just go back to the hand signals of yesteryear (circa 1971) to indicate left or right turns, back when people kept the windows down because air conditioning was too exotic, expensive and didn't work anyway.

Well, enough already. Instead of highway high anxiety, it's better to recall one of the last big songs from the 1970s and counsel peace, love and understanding. I will from now on be gentler with my boneheaded brother-and-sister random-blinker cohort. Maybe they too are sending distress signals into the jittery new world, wondering how we got on this road we're on.

This article has been adapted from a column originally written for the Tennessean *newspaper. Ray Waddle, MA'81, is an author and columnist who teaches a writing seminar at Vanderbilt Divinity School. His latest book is called* A Turbulent Peace: The Psalms for Our Time *(Upper Room Books).*

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I joined the Student YMCA/YWCA and found myself challenged by a faithful community to participate in the stand-ins and picket lines that in time changed these ironclad customs. In those years I learned two important lessons: (1) faith without action is feckless, and (2) you can be right, or pretty sure you're right, and people can still hate you. Until then I thought that if you tried very hard to be good, people would like you.

Madeleine L'Engle tells of how her children's novel *A Wrinkle in Time* routinely makes it onto the list of the 10 most frequently censored books in school and public libraries. She decided one year to read all 10 books. She found in common among them one thing: imagination.

Imagination is the human gift that enables us to perceive something not yet existing, to work toward ends we may never see. I am fortunate to live in the state that became the 36th needed to ratify the Women's Suffrage Amendment into the U.S. Constitution in 1920. In hard times I think of the 100 women and men at the Seneca Falls conference in 1848 who began the long campaign for women's vote. They knew that every single vote at every stage of this struggle would have to be cast by a man. Only one woman at Seneca Falls lived long enough to cast a vote in a presidential election.

Imagination is also the gift that enables us to see more than one side of a question. The very faith of Christians rests on an ambiguity: Was Jesus human or divine? The stained-glass windows of Christ Church Cathedral in Nashville recently were taken out to be restored. One of the oldest, "The Ascension Window," had become so begrimed over the decades that the bottom portion was unrecognizable: All one could see was Jesus ascending to heaven from an opaque blur. When the window came back gleamingly restored, parishioners were astonished to see two footprints left behind on the green grass by the human Jesus as the divine Jesus ascended into heaven.

"Standing" has many connotations: "Here I stand." "Stand by your man." "Stand up and be counted." "Stand up, stand up for Jesus." "Stand and deliver." "What is your standing in this case?" "To stand somewhere, for something." "Standing on promises."

To know where we stand in the present requires clarity about our past and imagination about our future. Walter Lippman writes that we must be at peace with the sources of our lives: "If we are ashamed of them, if we are at war with them, they will haunt us forever. They will rob us of our basis of assurance, they will leave us interlopers in the world." Because all institutions are human, they, like all human beings, are flawed. Will Campbell and James Holloway in *Up to Our Steeples in Politics* (1970) are prophetic in reminding us how sinful even the churchly institutions are. Once we recognize our own sins, we become less absolute in judging others as damned or saved.

The ambiguities of faith also require caution about politics and patriotism. The ancient Greeks believed that gods take sides in war. In Homer's *Iliad*, for example, the goddess Athena takes the side of the Greeks, the goddess Aphrodite of the Trojans. The God of Christians does not take sides. God's promise instead is to stand close by all who suffer. A careful look at Irving Berlin's beloved "God Bless America" can help us here: "Stand beside her and guide her, through the night with a light from above." God is implored to stand by, advise, and guide our actions, not to lead the charge in the service of American interests.

Our human stands, whether we take them in church or in politics or in solemn acts of civil disobedience, are always penultimate. They rest on next-to-last authority. If we consider them ultimate, then we are playing God and Allen Tate is right: We are converting human ideas into abstract absolutes that are the death of religion and of everything else. **V**

"Standing on the Promises" was adapted with permission from Susan Ford Wiltshire's essay in Where We Stand: Voices of Southern Dissent, *published by NewSouth Books (Montgomery, Ala.). Wiltshire is professor of classics and chair of the Department of Classical Studies at Vanderbilt.*