



My Car-Free Life



By Richard L. Johnson, MD

"LAST FEBRUARY I STOPPED DRIVING."

My remark, made casually to a small group of retired and semi-retired male acquaintances, stopped all conversation. After a moment of silence, I received an eruption of questions and comments: "Did I hear you right?" "Did you say that you stopped driving?" "What happened?" "Did you get in a wreck" "Did you get arrested?" "Why?" "DUI?" "You're kidding!" etc.

Insouciantly I replied, "My driver's license expired on my birthday. I didn't want the hassle of getting it renewed so I just let it drop and got rid of my car. Now I can't drive." After a pause, I became serious. I said I gave up driving because on certain occasions I did not see well enough to drive. To the remark that the DMV would give me a limited license to drive around town, I countered that I did not want a limited license; I felt more secure driving on I-5 than on the tree-lined streets of Colusa, population 6,000.

The topic of conversation shifted. I lost my chance to explain how two conditions, corneal opacity due to Fuchs' Dystrophy and age-related changes in adaptation to light, impair my vision. A sudden change from light to dark or dark to light momentarily blinds everyone, but for me the blindness lasts for a quarter of a minute or more. During that time, when I can't see an object as large as a Mack truck, how can I possibly see a mother and her children crossing a tree-shaded street in front of me?

That thought brought back a statement that has bothered me periodically since I made it almost 50 years ago: "There should be a maximum age limit for licensing drivers."¹ Fortunately, I did not mention any chronological age. This statement produced a bothersome question about my actions as an old man: Would I be stubborn and deny my disabilities or would I be wise, accept them and act accordingly?

I never realized how much and how long that brash comment has haunted me until a chance remark from one of my daughters: "Dad, ever since I was a little girl, I have heard you tell about the statement that you made about driving and how it might come back to you."

I admit that I am an old man who tells the same stories over and over. This is one of them and I usually add, "I don't want some smart young police officer to tell me, 'Pops! You can't drive any more. Give me the car keys.'"

I knew that giving up my driving would be a challenge. I publicized my inner debate by telling everyone who would listen that I was going to stop driving on my next birthday.

My 87th birthday came. I drove my car to the market, purchased a generous supply of food, came home, parked the car in the garage and closed the door. The new owner drove my car away the following day.

Eight months have passed. I have no regrets. I enjoy life without a car. It frees me from doing things I felt I had to do, such as going to night or out-of-town meetings. In this

small city, I live only a few blocks from the post office, bank, a market and other stores. Shopping gets me out of the house and gives me the exercise I need.

I have received many favorable comments, from people of all ages, about the wisdom of my action. Others, however, make self-revealing responses such as, "I couldn't live without driving." My neighbor, the same age as I, listened. On her birthday, May 11, she let her driver's license expire and gave her venerable sedan and little red pickup to a charitable organization.

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1. "Experts Offer Ideas to Cut Traffic Toll", p. D1, The Sacramento Bee, Friday, October 4, 1957

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