

Traveling Companion: A Sobering Experience

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On Monday morning at 4:00 a.m., I hopped on my bike for my usual early morning ride. The chill of the still dawning day beat on my face, waking it up. Two ladies drove into the parking lot and began their early morning walk. As I peddled on, I passed two elderly gentlemen out for their own morning stroll.

Two miles later, I noticed it. It was a car coming in the opposite direction. Traveling at about 10 miles an hour, I began to wonder about its purpose. Then, in my amazement, I discovered the car was traveling, not on the roadway, but on the nine foot wide bike and walking track. Gingerly, I prepared myself for an encounter of the first kind that would click into action my instinct to survive. Blinded by its approaching lights, I could not see the occupants of the car. I hoped they would see my dim bicycle light. They did and passed, slowly without running me off the trail.

Some time later, I heard the noise of a car behind me. The same car was approaching me. As it passed me, I got a glimpse of the occupants of the unregistered white Toyota car. A young woman sat in the front seat, driving at a snail's pace. In the back seat, I noticed a young man in a white shirt propped up. The car passed by and, some time later, stopped and parked in the parking area of the local fishing pier. I passed by, stealing a glance as I did.

Later, on my homeward bound trip, I rode into the same parking lot. Then I noticed that the young woman, was kneeling on the front seat and reaching over to the back seat, slapping the young man in the back seat repeatedly on the face. Obviously, she was trying to wake him up.

I realized he must have had a rough night and was feeling the effects with a big hangover. Now, he was paying the price for his short-lived, euphoric binge.

Initially, I chuckled at my encounter and experience but, deep down, I realized it had its own seasonal message.

I realized that the church year was breathing its last vestiges and preparing for the advent of a new one. The scripture readings reminded me of the end times, the times of trial and tribulation. Jesus spoke of wars and insurrections; of famines and earthquakes, of plagues and pestilence. I noted that he didn't say anything about drinking to access or working one's way through a hangover. But, he did remind us of the need to stand erect and raise our heads because our redemption was close at hand, even if we needed someone to slap us on the cheek a few times to get our attention and learn our lesson for our wayward ways.

I realized, too, that as Advent approached, we are reminded to stay awake; to rise from our drunken stupors and embrace a new season, a new day and a new hope.

Most of all, I realized that every new day is a gift; that the day and night that just passed may have been remembered, not for its achievement, but for its stupid decisions; but, instead, for the wisdom gained, the lessons learned and the opportunity to begin again.

Finally, I realized that, at the beginning of every Mass; no matter what our financial, social, ethnic status, we participate in a humbling experience when we admit to our God and to each others that we share one common flaw – we are sinners, but forgiven and redeemed. In that same Mass, I noted that before I receive the gift of Communion, I admit my unworthiness and ask the Lord to say the word and my soul will be healed.

Perhaps, my encounter that Monday morning was a metaphorical “wake up call.” Then again, for the young man, I'm sure it was a sobering experience.