MY VIEW FROM THE THIRD ACT

Grab the Stick



By Darren Somsen, Founder & CEO · Third Act USA, Inc.

Our generation is amazing because we learned to do it the hard way, and yet now we easily adapt when every new change is thrown at us. We're not Luddites. We embrace technology, but only the technology that we find useful.

This all came to mind when I was driving and had a 20-year-old in my car who laughed when I looked over my shoulder as I was backing out of a spot. They said, "You're old."

I said, "Why do you say that?"

"Because you looked over your shoulder when you backed out of the parking spot. Just use the camera," I was hollered at from the back seat.

I said, "Yeah, because that's how we were taught. Technology doesn't absolve my responsibility to be a safe driver. It's just a tool, another way to clear the lane."

We were also taught to drive stick. Driver's education vehicles, specifically on the range, all had four-speed manual transmissions. At the high school, half of the clutches were already burned out, even though they were only supposed to go 10 mph around the range with 20 other Ford Pintos doing the same.

We were taught to look over our shoulder, check our blind spots, clear the lane, push that clutch to the floor, ease it into first gear, and release the clutch, feathering it. Don't pop it. And we all understood. It was raw, it was easy, and it's how we were able to race a '67 Volkswagen Beetle with a 1300 cc air-cooled engine from 0 to 60 in about an hour.

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Mind you, Volkswagen put a 1500 in the '67. Mine had a 1300, and I didn't find that out until I'd broken two carburetors. I bought the rebuild kit for a 1967 Beetle, put it in, and the push rod snapped the carburetor's valve. So I did it again. Same thing. I returned two of them before we figured out what the problem was: somebody had swapped the original 1500 for an older 1300 cc engine, and on the 1300, the actuator rod is longer. There was no YouTube video to tell you that. So yes, the thing was slow, and it was mismatched.

But it didn't matter. First gear, jam your foot to the floor, wet road, tiny squeal, a smile on our face, revving it up till you'd hear the engine whining, jamming your foot down on the clutch, speeding it into second gear just in time for the light to change. We knew how to do it, and we did it well.

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Now we have a generation that laughs at us because we look over our shoulder to make sure we don't run over a stray shopping cart. But I'm old school with new technology. We went from a basic car where I used to have to keep my foot evenly on that gas pedal for hundreds of miles on a road trip, to now setting cruise control, having collision avoidance, and having your car bitch at you because you crossed the white line on the shoulder just briefly because you were reviewing your menu list on your iPod. (Because you just got a sudden urge to listen to New Order's "Love Vigilantes," and by God, it's on your iPod, so you are going to listen to it at that very moment.)

Our cars do a lot for us now. It's easier to make a long trip. Take your foot off the gas, set the cruise control, check the cameras, check the mirrors, relax.

But sometimes you really wish you could go back and grab the stick in that '67 Volkswagen Beetle with a four-speed transmission.

And that's my view from the Third Act.

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Grab the Stick

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