A bit of road rage: Try taking a better way home

by Sandi Dolbee

There are days when I wonder about a special place in hell for lane jumpers and the saps who let them take cuts. This was one of those days.

The line for the exit stretched longer than an Oliver Stone movie. Cars rolled forward a few inches every minute or so, imprisoned by a merciless traffic light at the end of the ramp.

Lane jumpers swarmed, taking advantage of a condo-sized hole left by the hapless driver in front of me. I honked and motioned for him to close the gap. He colorfully refused.

After the fifth car cut in, I began to rethink my stand on cruel and inhuman punishment.

Four days later, I called Steve Verret, a San Diego comic who teaches traffic school for motorists who get tickets for doing things like making unsafe lane changes. I figured he'd cheer me up and launch a few pithy salvos at these offenders.

Except the joke's on me.

I failed miserably, according to Verret, of Improv the Comedy Club Presents Traffic School. It wasn't just my horn honking. It was that four days later, I was still stewing about it.

"You should try to just forgive," he was telling me.

If you keep hitting the replay button in your mind, it only hurts you, he says. Your blood pressure goes up. You get impatient. The people around you, the ones you really care about, suffer the most.

It's not that Verret thought the lane jumpers were right.

"You have a lot of people who believe they're a lot more important than everyone else so they really don't have to wait," he says. "Those people make us angry. They do.

"You just kind of wish there was a police officer around to give them a ticket and maybe they'd come to my class."

As for urban aggravation, we're the ones in the driver's seat.

Verret says we need to work on having sympathy for drivers - no matter how hard it is. His advice: Try to imagine they're taking cuts because there is an emergency or for some other really noble reason.

I wanted Rambo. I was getting Mary Poppins.

"Come on," he was saying, in that nudging kind of way when a friend tries to cajole you out of a bad mood. "If you think about it, it's just a couple seconds out of your day."

He offers a couple exercises.

First exercise: Number from 1 to 10 how bad something is, with one being dropping a pencil and having to pick it up and 10 being getting shot by someone. If a driver cuts in front of you, use this exercise to realize that it's not the end of life as you know it.

Another exercise: Keep a mental list of five things you really love. Then, if somebody makes you mad on the road, think about what it would be like to lose all five things.

Verret blames much of our driving behavior on the destructive path of the Me Generation. "We live in a society today where people are more and more selfish every day."

But here's the punch line: That doesn't mean we have to be one of them.

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