

The Appalachian foothills of East Tennessee stretch out before me, rollercoaster-like in their climbs and dips, in their switchbacks and hairpin turns. At some points the serpentine road hugs the side of a mountain, sheer cliff on one side and abyss on the other. In another spot it ploughs through the limestone in a one-way tunnel— there aren't any instructions on how to proceed here, but common sense and experience dictate a pause, a loud honk, and a flash of headlights if it's dark. I've often thought while passing through that tunnel that the difference between a safe passage and utter disaster hinges on one simple thing: attention.

When it comes to driving, attention is a matter of life and death. Unfortunately, we live in an age of distraction. While not the sole culprit, smartphones certainly are a primary cause of distracted driving. When teenage inexperience is combined with smartphone distraction, the results on the road are disastrous.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, distracted driving can be categorized in three ways: visual (eyes off the road), manual (hands off the wheel), and cognitive (mind wandering elsewhere). Smartphone activities such as texting or scrolling social media and other apps qualify as distraction at every level. It's clear that distracted teen driving must be prevented in order to save lives. The question is, how?

One obvious approach is to limit access to smartphone technology while driving. This could be done via a program to "lock" the smartphone while the vehicle is traveling over a certain mile-per-hour. For example, the phone would prevent any texting or scrolling once the vehicle is going over 10 mph. If we can track mileage and speed via GPS, surely this would be achievable. I'm sure parents would be eager to protect their young drivers with this technological safeguard.

And yet, I wonder...dare I hope that my fellow teenagers might be persuaded to put their phones down not just because of technological monitoring, but because of the damage perpetually divided attention is doing to our brains— to our humanity? We are losing the ability to pay undivided attention to anything, and it is killing us, literally and figuratively.

How many conversations with the real passengers in our cars have we foregone in favor of digital "connection"? How many sunsets on the open road will we never notice? Many teenagers have exchanged actual reality for a cheap substitute, mediated through the devices in our hands, as addictive as any drug and perhaps as destructive. It's clear that something is dangerously amiss when we're willing to risk our lives and the lives of others on our roads for one more scroll, one more text, one more glance at TikTok.

The solution to that deeper problem has to start with the adults we look up to. First of all, adults must model attention for children and teens in all contexts. A great place to begin is in the car— make sure your phone is out of your hand, so teens know that cell phone use while driving is absolutely unacceptable. "Do as I say, not as I do" is not an option here — the stakes are too high. Show us how to be fully present and attentive in our cars, in our homes, and in our schools. Expect much of us, and light the way through your own example.

Cresting the hill near my house, I see a line of headlights snaking through the dark valley of my East Tennessee town. I wonder where each car is going. It occurs to me that driving together on our streets and highways is an extraordinary act of trust in our fellow humans. We trust each other to value our own lives and the lives of others enough to drive safely. I want to be worthy of this trust; I want to pay attention to what is most important. Smartphones compete for our attention, but we must not let them win. The lives of teen drivers depend on it. Just by paying attention, we can help each other arrive safely at home.