

Dispelling Myths and Clichés

By Vic “Doc” Moss

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I can honestly say that I have never crashed on a street motorcycle (on a dirt bike is another matter, but that’s to be expected), and that is not by luck, it is because *I work really hard* at riding safely. Oh sure, I have a lot “street smarts” but physics doesn’t care about street smarts, and physiology and psychology don’t care about the myths and clichés, either. Smart, strategic riding is what keeps me safe. So, let’s dispel myths and clichés.

Myth #1: We Are Part of a Motorcycle Community

In Nevada, there are approximately 150,000 licensed riders, but with only 75,000 registered motorcycles¹. There are approximately 330 million people in the U.S. and according to the CDC, 3,383,729 died in 2020⁴ for a rate of 1.0%. Doing the math, that means around 1,500 license riders will die in Nevada each year. If one of those people died from a brain aneurysm or heart attack, would anyone in the “motorcycle community” care or even know? If not, then why is it tragic when they die while riding a motorcycle?

Yes, it’s sad when someone you know personally dies, but there is no such thing as collective sorrow or collective grief, simply because they share the same mode of transportation as someone else. Granted, riders usually stick together for good causes or to help one another. If a rider is on the side of the road, another rider (in a car or on a motorcycle) will usually stop to offer help, if only because we’ve all been in that situation. But unless you’re in a motorcycle club or have a small group of people you ride with often, the fact is that there’s no such thing as a motorcycle community, only a bunch of people who happen to own and ride motorcycles as their mode of transportation.

Myth #2: Drivers Cut Me Off All the Time

Think about that, if you get cut off frequently, *what’s the common denominator?* What are you doing to allow yourself to get into those situations to begin with? Why aren’t you seeing the traps being set before they happen? Are you riding too fast or are you simply not paying attention? *Or do you even understand the risks?* Safe riding requires thoughtful reflection on poor decision-making. Good judgment comes from experience, but experience usually comes from bad judgment.

Myth #3: Loud Pipes Save Lives

This is one of the biggest myths around and buying into this as though it’s some sort of safety feature only raises your risk because you are *putting faith into a fallacy*.³

Sound is omni directional unless it is channeled, which on a motorcycle, is channeled to the rear. Yet 90% of two-vehicle crashes happen in front of the rider and only 3% of crashes happen from behind. Do you really believe that the sound going out the back of a motorcycle will help in a frontal crash? Even fire engines are not heard with their 125 dB horns and sirens.

The purpose of a siren is to get people to look around, but with today’s ultra-quiet interiors, it’s nearly impossible to hear the sirens. Vehicles have sound deadening materials and some have active noise cancelling technology. Your loud pipes aren’t as loud as a fire engine so nobody will hear it anyway.

Of course, the usual example of how loud pipes saves lives is, “I was next to a car that started to pull in on me, so I rapped on the throttle, and they moved back into their own lane.” Cool. My question is, what were you doing there to begin with? *They can’t hit you if you’re not there.*

Of course, the normal retort to that is, “Well, what if I am passing a vehicle; I’m going to be in the blind spot.”

Yep, for a moment, but think about what it would take to “rap on the throttle” to make a lot of noise. You would have to squeeze in the clutch to make all sorts of noise, which takes away power from the rear wheel, instead of simply rolling on the throttle to get away from the encroaching car. And what idiot came up with “rev bombing” on sport bikes? Rather than using your brakes when someone crosses your path, you’d rather rev your motor to 15,000 RPM for no apparent reason. *Brilliant.*

So, onto the clichés.

Cliché #1: Ride Your Own Ride

Here’s a totally meaningless cliché. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation defines this cliché as “To honestly self-assess and ride within personal, motorcycle, situational, and legal limits, unaffected by what others may think.” Um. Sure.

If you’re riding with others, for good or bad, and whether you like it or not, you are riding the group’s ride. You cannot control what others are doing, so you are affected by their behavior. But here’s the kicker, behavior that is tolerated becomes accepted. Once accepted, it becomes the group norm, and once it becomes the group norm, it becomes encouraged. *Peer pressure is extremely powerful and very subtle.* Sociologists and cult leaders know this quite well.

You get to choose who you ride with and if you choose poorly, your chances of a mishap go up dramatically. If you ride with a bunch of hooligans, you’ll probably become a statistic. If you ride with responsible riders, you probably won’t. Remember, you are not riding your own ride; you are riding the group’s ride. To truly ride your own ride, ride alone.

Cliché #2: There Was Nothing I Could Do, So I Laid Down My Bike

Rubber has a greater coefficient of friction than plastic and steel, so having the bike sliding on plastic and steel extends your stopping distance. “Laying the bike down” is an intentional crash, and that is not a very good stopping technique. Moreover, if you practice crashing, imagine what you could do if you practiced avoiding a crash to begin with. Imagine what you could do if you learned how to ride *better and smarter* instead of learning how to crash.

Cliché #3: Open Your Eyes; Look for Me

Motorcycles make up 3 percent of all registered vehicles in the United States in 2020 and accounted for only 0.6 percent of all Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT).⁵ Based on VMT, that means only 6 of 1000 vehicles a driver encounters on the road will be a motorcycle. We know that motorcyclist usually don’t ride during the winter months in the northern states or during inclement weather, and those who only ride occasionally, so the actual number of motorcyclists a driver is likely to encounter on a daily drive is likely significantly less than the 6 in 1,000 based on the VMT.

Most riders have no idea why motorists cannot see us, and they have no idea what the risk that the face really is. They also don’t know how far it takes to stop, nor the time needed to do so.

The legal requirement to drive in all U.S. jurisdictions is a visual acuity of 20/40 in one eye; you can be totally blind in the other or have an acuity of 20/70 in both eyes. Think about that, a person who has no depth perception or cannot see clearly what the average person can see with 20/20 vision, is

legally allowed to operate a vehicle. Moreover, most people don't have their eyes checked regularly and mostly only every eight years when they go to the DMV to physically renew their drivers' licenses.

If you don't understand what those numbers mean, 20/20 vision means that you can clearly see a 3/8-inch letter from 20 feet away. That is considered normal vision for the average person; not perfect, but normal. If you have 20/70 vision, it means you'd have to be 20 feet away from something to clearly see what someone with 20/20 vision can see at 70 feet. Let's extend that out a bit. You'd have to be at 40 feet to see what someone with 20/20 vision can clearly see at 140 feet, and *you'd have to be at 100 feet to see what someone with 20/20 vision can clearly see at 350 feet.*

Now, there is a direct relationship between time, speed, and distance. The faster you go, the farther you are traveling per second, and that distance grows exponentially with speed. At 60 mph, you are traveling approximately 90 feet per second (fps). (It's actually 88 fps but round numbers are easier to calculate).

Generally speaking, it takes 4 seconds to stop, which means at 60 mph, you are traveling 360 feet in the time that it takes to stop. Do you really believe that someone with 20/70 vision can see you if they would simply "open their eyes" and look for you? *Don't count on it.* A person with 20/40 vision in one eye and blind in the other probably cannot tell what your rate of approach is in the unlikely event that they actually see you.

Riders seem to believe that they are smarter than Isaac Newton, who was a pretty smart guy. It doesn't matter how great you think your braking techniques are, nor what sort of aftermarket calipers you've put on your bike, you cannot overcome Newton's Laws of Motion. Speed limits are determined by traffic engineers, who are also really smart guys who calculate speed, distance and probabilities of vehicles crossing your path. Those engineers know that a vehicle cannot turn left and clear the intersection in the time it takes you to get to that intersection when you are riding at 60+ mph when the speed limit is 45. And you want to blame it on the driver? Maybe you should ask yourself why you think you're smarter than Sir Isaac and the traffic engineers.

Now, let's add on top of that the problem with how people see.

Even if someone has 20/20 vision, that doesn't mean they have perfect vision. As we age, our eyes deteriorate just like the rest of our bodies. Some people will start to get "floaters" which are small dark spots that move around blocking small parts of the view that they are seeing. The floaters are caused by deterioration of the retina and don't stay in one place. Then as cataracts begin to form on our lens (something that all of us will eventually have), you might start seeing spider webs, especially in low light conditions. Those problems can start to show up as early as age 50.

Add on top of that how we can only clearly see 3 degrees in front of us⁴, so a motorcyclist sitting a mere 30 degrees off center (1 o'clock on a face dial), cannot be distinguished from anything else in the blurred vision. In the meantime, motorists are mostly concerned with what's in their immediate path of travel. If someone looks away from what's in front of them, that person runs the risk of running into that object.

Now, we really don't see with our eyes at all; *we see with our brains.* Our eyes simply bring in light and translate that light to electrical signals, then send those signals to our brain (upside down) where the brain must interpret what those signals mean. Because our brain already knows stuff, it also knows what it wants to know and will ignore what it doesn't want to know.

So, there's a motorist sitting at an intersection looking in both directions, looking for an opening, picking up all the light from side to side. The eyes send all that information to the brain, and the brain says, "I don't care" because the brain only cares about whether it's clear to go and ignores what it doesn't want to see. That's because our brain decides what's important, and one motorcyclist out of a thousand vehicles on the road doesn't register as important. Again, we don't see with our eyes, we see with our brain while our brain is busy processing all sorts of information.

Lastly, by the time all that happens, and an image is implanted in the brain, everything has changed. What we see is not what we see; what we see is what we just saw.

Every time I hear "Open Your Eyes; Look for Me," I think, NO! *Open your mind and look for them. You know what the risks are, and you know what the traps are.* It's up to you to protect yourself and not hope and pray that someone else will do something to make you safe.

It's your life; so, act like that means something. Maybe you should ask yourself how much your life is worth, or maybe how little. If you don't care enough about your own life to ride smartly and responsibly, why should anyone else care? *Nobody cares about you, but you.* And if you don't understand what that means, it is the reason that the Donner Party *ate each other* in the 1840s or why those who survived an airplane crash in the Andes Mountains *ate each other* in the 1970s. Nobody cares about you, but you. If you still don't understand, look up Abraham Maslow.⁶

Doc has ridden motorcycles for nearly 50 years, logging over 600,000 miles on a variety of motorcycle styles in many places around the world. He has been involved in motorcycle rights and safety efforts since the early 1990s and has been a nationally accredited motorcycle instructor since 1998, teaching classes from beginning to advanced riding skills. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Post-Secondary and Adult Education from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and a Master of Science in Management from Troy University. He is also a former faculty member at the College of Southern Nevada, Department of Business and Industry, and a prior appointee to the Governor's Advisory Council on Motorcycle Safety in Nevada.

Notes:

1. State Motorcycle Licensing Information-2018. <https://msf-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/rr3-pdf.pdf>
2. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Deaths and Mortality. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/deaths.htm>
3. Do loud pipes save lives? Now you have the answer! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9QTPyMJGgo&t=322s>
4. Central Vision – DriversEd.com. https://driversed.com/resources/terms/central_vision/
5. NHTSA Traffic Safety Facts, 2020 Data, May 2022. <https://www.nhtsa.gov/press-releases/2020-traffic-crash-data-fatalities>
6. A Theory of Human Motivation, A. H. Maslow (1943). <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>