

## **What Next?**

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Just before Christmas, my wife and I traveled from our home to Boston's South Station. Our final destination was Florida to visit with her parents for the Christmas holiday. To accomplish this, we drive from Maine to Portsmouth to take a C&J bus to South Station where we get on the train to New York, have lunch with my sister, and then the overnight train to Florida. It's a long trip, but along the way I have the opportunity to reflect on how different forms of transportation deal with safety.

Any time an object or a person is in motion there is an ever-present danger of loss, either property or personal injury. Consider that driving is dangerous, but not because the road is dangerous; it is people, *other drivers*, who make it so. My wife and I arrived safely in Portsmouth because traffic was light at 5:00 a.m., and because I was careful on the wet road and I was watching out for other drivers who might not be as careful.

We arrived safely at the Portsmouth bus terminal where we boarded the C&J bus, an NHMTA member. C&J has an excellent safety record. Their drivers have to pass through strict hiring guidelines, road tests, and orientation. They are seasoned professionals who drive excellent and well-maintained busses that are routinely examined and monitored. In spite of a gloomy rainy morning with high winds, the driver kept the bus on the move in the proper lanes, maintained proper following distances and remained alert. When we reached Boston, he skillfully threaded his way through

Boston's streets, by then clogged with heavy rush hour traffic. We arrived at South Station in plenty of time for our 9:15 train.

I mention the details because here is a company, like so many of the members of NHMTA, where safety is the *first* priority. The object of every trip is to deliver the passengers to their destination safely. They do this every day, seven days a week; they are able to do this because the drivers practice safe driving skills every trip and follow safety regulations and the company's strict requirements.

On the way down, I glanced out the window and saw one of those electronic message signs put up by departments of transportation. On it was a safety message I had not seen before, but it was a symptom of our evolving driving environment. It warned drivers, "ALERT. Headphones are prohibited...only one ear bud allowed..." or something to that effect. *Good grief*, I thought...what next? Do we really have to tell people that it is dangerous to wear headphones while driving? So, an official agency of the state allows one ear bud? This is a sign of an increasingly dangerous distracted society on the move. When we wear headphones, we are actually closing off the outside world and retreating into our own.

Are we accommodating these people by telling them that wearing one ear bud is acceptable....that it is safe? Closing off the world around us may be a great escape from the usual noise around the house, but it especially dangerous when people are driving

their cars; we have to make our drivers more aware of the drivers around them while we make them aware of their own bad driving behavior.

Distracted driving can be found in all forms of transportation, not just cars and trucks...while we have welcomed these electronic communication and entertainment devices into our home and lives, we now have them available to us in our cars and trucks and drivers think they can operate both the devices and the vehicle simultaneously. How do cars, trucks, and busses arrive safely at their destination? They do so because their operators pay attention to the act of safe vehicle operation and following the rules. When drivers don't follow the rules, collisions result.

As we crossed over the Tobin Bridge/Mystic River Bridge, we noticed a 747 or another type of large aircraft approaching for a landing at Logan Airport. As I said, it was very windy that morning and we were glad we weren't flying. As it descended for its landing, we could see how the wind was buffeting the aircraft as its wings dipped to one side and then the next. As it got closer to the runway, I began to think about the training and skill that an aircraft pilot has to possess before he or she can fly a commercial aircraft. In addition to skill, a pilot has to know as much about flight regulations in addition to knowing which button controls *what* in front of him. Flying an aircraft takes skill and knowledge far beyond the person who owns a small civilian aircraft, but even there, safety is the first priority.

Before going into the tunnel on approach to the Interstate, I gazed down upon the docks under us, realizing the same is true for mariners. Even the weekend sailor has to have knowledge of the water and practice safety. Maritime regulations are all derived from disasters of one type or another just as rail, highway, and air regulations. Safety of the seas and inland waterways are regulated by the Coast Guard, marine patrols and international organizations. Any maritime disaster or incident, whether on a lake, river, stream or on the ocean, is often avoided by following safety rules...by people paying attention to doing what is right for safety's sake.

As we boarded the train, I was watching for the rules that govern rail operations. Safety of the public is paramount in transportation. I made observations of the trains backing into the station for the outbound trips, and trains entering the station to disgorge their passengers. Each was following established rules and regulations to avoid injury and property loss. Trains entered the platform areas at a speed set by rules, stopping short of the bumper posts...located there as a secondary precaution against a failure of some sort, human or mechanical.

When our train departed South Station, I was aware of the operating rules, strictly followed by the engineer. The on-board train crew made all the required safety announcements in addition to the routine announcements (also required) about the location of the cafe car. As the train accelerated and sped along the tracks, the engineer followed all the speed designations for the sections over which he was operating.

When the engineer had to blow the train's horn at the few highway grade crossings (on the Northeast Corridor, most of the highway grade crossings that used to be in place along the route were eliminated or replaced by overpasses or other means because of the high speeds - a safety program that took years to accomplish), it was the required signals he blew, the time-honored two longs, a short, and a long. The last is to be held until the locomotive is on the grade crossing...to ensure an adequate warning for safety.

Sitting across the aisle from us was a man who for the entire four-hour journey was making cell phone calls to his business associates. Because he was wearing ear buds, we only heard half of his conversations. If only we were corporate spies... But it didn't seem to matter to this guy that he was intruding on our enjoyment of the trip. It is just another indication of the world we live in. Drivers are now conducting business in a similar manner in their cars and trucks.

At Penn Station in New York City, thousands pass through the station, daily. Because of the world situation today and the constant safety threat posed by individuals and/or groups, I noticed that armed police officers walked among the crowds in clusters of two and three; some were accompanied by canines, duly outfitted with badges. Safety is always on the minds of these public servants who monitor transport facilities.

Because of the busy holiday travel, safety precautions were evident practically everywhere...even on the escalators leading to the platforms below the station

concourse. Attendants were posted warning people to be careful, to hold onto the handrails while traveling the escalator...another form of transport.

So, what next? What do we have to do to make people, not just drivers, more practitioners of safety rather than bystanders? This is our challenge. Every company has to promote safety and put it in practice. Look around you and pay attention to the warning signs...people becoming more dependent on electronic devices, stepping out in front of moving vehicles without looking out for them...drivers texting or talking on their cell phones and not seeing the pedestrian who is texting while walking in front of them; people driving while closing off the world around them while they pay more attention to music or another's conversation. This is our future.

What next? Stay tuned...it won't be long.