

Rear View Wisdom

Who's Driving Your Car?

By Dan Ofstedal – December 19, 2025 ¹



*“And you may find yourself
Behind the wheel of a large automobile.
And you may ask yourself, well... how did I get here?”
— Talking Heads, Once in a Lifetime*

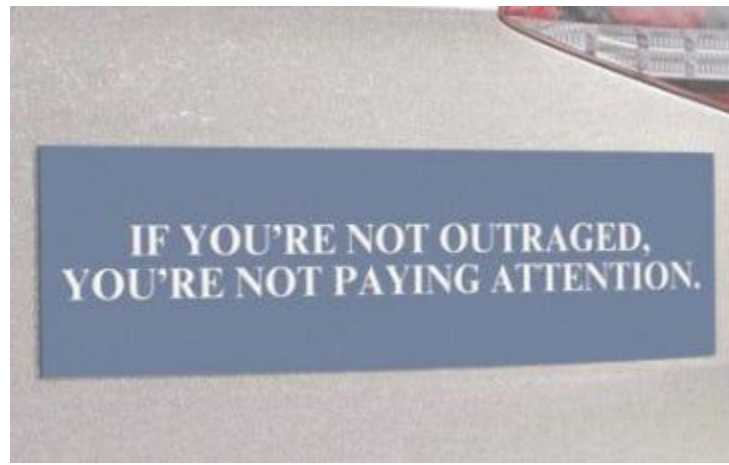
I’ve never put a bumper sticker on my car. Ever.
Something about not wearing my opinions on my sleeve, I suppose.

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Still, I enjoy reading them—especially the ones that offer a glimpse into the driver’s inner world. After all, it takes some effort to buy a bumper sticker and permanently attach it to your vehicle. Whatever it says must matter enough to follow you around town.

Some bumper stickers are jokes. Some are tribal signals. But the ones that interest me most reveal a philosophy—a way of being in the world.

I want to look at two of them. Think of them as bookends on a spectrum of consciousness: from knee-jerk reaction to thoughtful response, from lack to abundance, from victim to freedom.



(“If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention”)

I understand the sentiment. I really do.

When you look at the news, you see war, injustice, corruption, and suffering. A voice inside says, This isn’t right. And that voice has a very good point.

It’s good to want the world to change. It’s good to participate in that change.

But something often gets added—something subtle but powerful. A feeling. Upset. Anger. Outrage.

Outrage can feel energizing. It can even feel virtuous. Unfortunately, it also narrows perception. When we’re outraged, we don’t see clearly—we react. And reaction is rarely wise.

From an evolutionary standpoint, this makes sense. When something is labeled “bad,” the brain detects threat. Stress hormones kick in. The part of the brain responsible for nuance and judgment gets pushed aside. This system evolved to protect us from predators, not to help us read the news or argue online.

So outrage activates ancient survival circuitry that often misfires in modern life. The result is overreaction, moral certainty, and a tendency to see others as stupid, evil, or less than.

Look around. That's the world we live in: people reacting impulsively, emotionally, and self-righteously—adding damage rather than reducing it.

We're also taught, implicitly, that acting on our emotions is authenticity. Movies reinforce this endlessly. In fact, there's an entire category of entertainment devoted to people reacting to one another called "drama."

It's compelling on screen.

Less so in real life.

If you live from constant upset and outrage, you won't be effective. And you'll leave a trail of damage behind you.

There is another way.

It begins with awareness—not just of what's happening out there, but of what's happening in here: thoughts, emotions, bodily reactions. Awareness creates a pause. And in that pause, you regain choice.

When you're aware, you don't suppress anger—you wait. You let the emotional surge pass so you can see clearly. Then you respond rather than react.

You also begin to understand something both unsettling and freeing: everyone else is operating from their conditioning—their biology, upbringing, wounds, and beliefs. If you were them, with the same genes and experiences, you'd be doing exactly what they're doing.

That realization dissolves offense. You stop taking things personally. You stop feeling like a victim.

And that brings me to the second bumper sticker:



(It's never too late to have a happy childhood")

At first glance, this one sounds absurd. Obviously, that's false. Childhoods, by definition, are over.

And yet—psychologically—it isn't false at all.

Stories are an essential part of being human. We're constantly telling them: stories about yesterday, today, and tomorrow. These stories give our lives coherence and meaning.

The problem is that we tend to treat these stories as facts rather than interpretations—as if they're permanent, fixed, and inseparable from who we are.

But they're not.

They're constructions, generated by what you might call the ego-narrator. Often for understandable reasons. Sometimes even for survival.

And where there is one story, there are alternatives.

Take childhood. Many of us carry a story of our childhood that lives somewhere on the spectrum between “good” and “bad.” It probably includes some of each.

But regardless of the facts, consider this: someone kept you alive when you were most vulnerable. Infants don't survive long on their own. Someone fed you, changed you, got up at night, often sleep-deprived. Someone truly sacrificed. Not every infant received that care. Some never made it. You did.

That doesn't change facts, erase pain or excuse harm. Therapy can be invaluable, and boundaries are good.

But meaning is flexible.

And to truly see that your parent—or whoever raised you—was doing their best, even if their best wasn't very good, is forgiveness. And forgiveness isn't about letting anyone off the hook. It's about freeing yourself.

The same principle applies to what happened five years ago. Or last year. Or yesterday. Or whatever happens tomorrow.

You can keep the facts and change the story.

The point of that second bumper sticker isn't nostalgia or denial.
It's authorship.

When we're unaware, we live as if our emotional reactions and personal stories are simply “the way things are.” We react. We resent. We replay. We feel like a victim. We are controlled—by the past, by other people, by the world.

Awareness changes that. Awareness gives us a pause. And in that pause, a real choice.

You can continue living from outrage, from inherited narratives, from reflex and reaction.

Or you can open your mind, and ask yourself “how did I get here?”

Then chart a new course.

And drive the car.