

Anna Quindlen

Writer Anna Quindlen was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1952, and now lives in New York City. While attending Barnard College, she worked as a copy girl at *The New York Times*. After graduating, Quindlen was a reporter for *The New York Post* before returning to the *Times* in 1977. At the *Times* she eventually became a regular op-ed columnist, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary in 1992. In 1995 Quindlen left newspaper work and devoted herself primarily to fiction. She has written novels, nonfiction, self-help books, and children's books. Quindlen also wrote regularly for *Newsweek*, where this article appeared on June 11, 2007.

Pre-Reading Journal Entry

MyWritingLab

Getting a driver's license is an important rite of passage for young people in the United States. It's often preceded by a highly stressful process of learning to drive. Recall your own driving lessons and licensing tests. Who taught you to drive? What were the lessons like? What emotions did you experience while learning to drive and taking your driving test? If you do not know how to drive, why not? How do you feel about not having a driver's license? Use your journal to answer these questions.

Driving to the Funeral

The four years of high school grind inexorably to a close, the milestones passed. The sports contests, the SATs, the exams, the elections, the dances, the proms. And too often, the funerals. It's become a sad rite of passage in many American communities, the services held for teenagers killed in auto

accidents before they've even scored a tassel to hang from the rearview mirror. The hearse moves in procession followed by the late-model compact cars of young people, boys trying to control trembling lower lips and girls sobbing into one another's shoulders. The yearbook has a picture or two with a black border. A mom and dad rise from their seats on the athletic field or in the gym to accept a diploma posthumously.

It's simple and inarguable: car crashes are the No. 1 cause of death among 15- to 20-year-olds in this country. What's so peculiar about that fact is that so few adults focus on it until they are planning an untimely funeral. Put it this way: if someone told you that there was one single behavior that would be most likely to lead to the premature death of your kid, wouldn't you try to do something about that? Yet parents seem to treat the right of a 16-year-old to drive as an inalienable one, something to be neither questioned nor abridged.

This makes no sense unless the argument is convenience, and often it is. In a nation that developed mass-transit amnesia and traded the exurb for the small town, a licensed son or daughter relieves parents of a relentless roundelay of driving. Soccer field, Mickey Ds, mall, movies. Of course, if that's the rationale, why not let 13-year-olds drive? Any reasonable person would respond that a 13-year-old is too young. But statistics suggest that that's true of 16-year-olds as well. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has found that neophyte drivers of 17 have about a third as many accidents as their counterparts only a year younger.

In 1984 a solution was devised for the problem of teenage auto accidents that lulled many parents into a false sense of security. The drinking age was raised from 18 to 21. It's become gospel that this has saved thousands of lives, although no one actually knows if that's the case; fatalities fell, but the use of seat belts and airbags may have as much to do with that as penalties for alcohol use. And there has been a pronounced negative effect on college campuses, where administrators describe a forbidden-fruit climate that encourages binge drinking. The pitchers of sangria and kegs of beer that offered legal refreshment for 18-year-olds at sanctioned campus events 30 years ago have given way to a new tradition called "pre-gaming," in which dry college activities are preceded by manic alcohol consumption at frats, dorms and bars.

Given the incidence of auto-accident deaths among teenagers despite the higher drinking age, you have to ask whether the powerful lobby Mothers Against Drunk Driving simply targeted the wrong D. In a survey of young drivers, only half said they had seen a peer drive after drinking. Nearly all, however, said they had witnessed speeding, which is the leading factor in fatal crashes by teenagers today. In Europe, governments are relaxed about the drinking age but tough on driving regulations and licensing provisions; in most countries, the driving age is 18.

In America some states have taken a tough-love position and bumped up the requirements for young drivers: longer permit periods, restrictions or bans on night driving. Since the greatest danger to a teenage driver is another teenager in the car—the chance of having an accident doubles with two teenage passengers and skyrockets with three or more—some new rules forbid novice drivers from transporting their peers.

In theory this sounds like a good idea; in fact it's toothless. New Jersey has some of the most demanding regulations for new drivers in the nation, including a provision that until they are 18 they cannot have more than one nonfamily member in the car. Yet in early January three students leaving school in Freehold Township died in a horrific accident in which the car's 17-year-old driver was violating that regulation by carrying two friends. No wonder he took the chance: between July 2004 and November 2006, only 12 provisional drivers were ticketed for carrying too many passengers. Good law, bad enforcement.

States might make it easier on themselves, on police officers and on teenagers, too, if instead of chipping away at the right to drive they merely raised the legal driving age wholesale. There are dozens of statistics to back up such a change: in Massachusetts alone, one third of 16-year-old drivers have been involved in serious accidents. Lots and lots of parents will tell you that raising the driving age is untenable, that the kids need their freedom and their mobility. Perhaps the only ones who wouldn't make a fuss are those parents who have accepted diplomas at graduation because their children were no longer alive to do so themselves, whose children traded freedom and mobility for their lives. They might think it was worth the wait.