

## THE ANATOMY OF A TRAGIC ROAD RAGE INCIDENT

Angry and rageful drivers are continually making clear (although not necessarily conscious) choices, even though they may feel and look “completely out-of-control” to themselves and other people. The escalation to increased anger and destructive behavior can be rekindled by seeing the other car and then reacting to another driver’s actions, or it can be allowed to decrease by actively making more positive choices to do things such as avoiding eye contact, thoughts are verbal statements that further inflame the situation, or behaviors designed to punish or intimidate the other driver or “*teach him (or her) a lesson.*”

The intensity of road rage is determined by controlling and entitled attitudes and the rationalizations and justifications that are used to continue to engage with that other driver. The more “rounds” that antagonists go with each other, the more reasons they will find for continuing and escalating the situation even further.

Truly understanding what happens in a road rage incident requires the willingness and the ability to analyze a road rage altercation and see its natural steps of development or escalation. To help you recognize these steps, we will analyze an actual road rage “battle” that involved three angry and aggressive drivers in which “provocation” led to “provocation,” ultimately ending in tragedy for all the participants.

The sequence of events listed below is reconstructed from a broadcast of a CBS news program and court records related to this case. It involves a 54-year-old retired auto worker and church deacon from Woonsocket, Rhode Island, who became the defendant in a criminal trial for “first degree murder with extreme cruelty and atrocity.” The deacon fits a number of the criteria related to the “Road Ranger” discussed in the section that identified the different types of road ragers that I have encountered in my work with anger and abuse over the years.

### AN ACTUAL SEQUENCE OF ROAD RAGE STEPS AND CHOICES THAT ARE MADE IN THIS SITUATION:

**STEP 1:** A woman on Interstate 95 in Rhode Island came up fast on another car in the left lane driven by an emergency medical technician and a friend of his who were returning from work. The woman flashed the two men with her high beams to indicate to them that she wanted them to move over so she could pass them.

#### **CHOICE POINT 1:**

A female driver who was in a hurry and impatient about being “held back” in traffic decided to tailgate and flash her bright lights at the two men ahead of her to get them to move over from the far left lane and let her go by. Depending on the mood of the other driver, this can easily be perceived as an “affront” that can begin a process that leads to a road rage incident.

**STEP 2:** The two men moved over to the middle lane to let her pass but then got back into the passing lane, put their brights lights on, and followed her.

### **CHOICE POINT 2:**

The male driver became angry that the woman used her bright lights to signal that she was coming up from behind and wanted to pass them. He responded by deciding to move back into the passing lane to “punish” her for this action by turning on his bright lights and commencing to follow her. This type of “punishing” or vengeful behavior is never helpful when driving; it will not be effective in altering the other driver’s behavior and instead often escalates the other driver and the situation.

**STEP 3:** A 54-year-old church deacon and retired auto worker was driving on this same interstate with his wife, after enjoying an afternoon of attending a dance class and an evening meal together at a Howard Johnson’s restaurant. The deacon did not like the fact that the two men were acting this way with the female driver (whom he did not know) and he moved over two lanes from where he was driving in the right lane. He then turned on his bright lights and began to closely follow them at high speed.

### **CHOICE POINT 3:**

The deacon became indignant about the two men having the “audacity” to flash their bright lights and then proceed to closely follow the female driver who had flashed them with her lights. So he decided to “punish” the two men by moving behind them with his bright lights on. It was later reported that he was “disgusted” by the other driver’s behavior because he didn’t like people “bullying” other people. He apparently told his wife that he was going to “teach the other driver a lesson.” His decision to intervene “on the woman’s behalf” set the stage for the eventual deadly outcome.

**STEP 4:** The deacon continued to tailgate the two men at high speed with his bright lights on.

### **CHOICE POINT 4:**

The deacon made the choice to continue to follow the two men in order to “punish” them further for their “transgression” rather than slowing down or pulling off the freeway and thereby disengaging from the power struggle that was occurring.

**STEP 5:** The two men, feeling confused and irritated themselves that they were being followed so closely by the deacon, moved over to the middle lane. The deacon then moved over to the middle lane, continuing to tailgate them at high speed, with his bright lights on, for over eight miles.

### **CHOICE POINT 5:**

The two men made a positive choice to move out of the way of the driver behind them (unless their plan was to then tailgate him to punish him for what he had done to them). However, the deacon made the choice to move over behind the two men and continue to follow them at high speed. He apparently told his wife, “*You never let an enemy get behind you,*” making a decision to view the two men as “enemies” whom he needed to vanquish in this rapidly escalating driving duel.

**STEP 6:** Eventually, the emergency medical technician, exasperated by being followed, said to his companion, “*I’m going to pull over and ask this guy what his problem is,*” and moved to the right shoulder of the highway, stopping his car. The deacon then immediately pulled over on the right shoulder behind the two men.

### **CHOICE POINT 6:**

The second driver made the choice to pull over to the side of the road, which could have been a positive move to de-escalate the situation if the deacon had driven on and the EMT did not continue with a chase of his own. However, the EMT expected the deacon to stop and planned to confront this man who was following him, hoping to elicit an “explanation” of why the deacon was doing what he was doing. Pulling over the side of the road “to talk” during a road rage incident is always a poor decision and can lead to a verbal or physical altercation. Sadly, in this instance, the situation was only further escalated as the deacon also stopped alongside the road, again refusing to allow the “enemy” to get behind him, which contributed to the fatal outcome.

**STEP 7:** The two men exited their vehicle and started to walk toward the deacon’s car, with the driver holding a large flashlight as he approached the deacon and his wife. The deacon also got out of his car after telling his wife, “*We’ve got big trouble coming down here,*” went immediately to his trunk and opened it, retrieving a crossbow from the vehicle that he owned and carried because he was an “avid archery buff.”

### **CHOICE POINT 7:**

The two men made the decision to leave their vehicle (always a poor decision with other angry drivers) and walk toward the deacon’s car, with the EMT holding a flashlight, which the deacon could have easily perceived to be a “weapon.” The deacon, feeling threatened by the two “bigger and younger men,” (as he reported later) responded by choosing to seek out a weapon of his own, the crossbow he stored in the trunk of his car which he used for target shooting and for “protection” in his car. Carrying a baseball bat, a wrench, a screwdriver, a hammer, a golf club, a knife, a gun, a crossbow, or any other “weapon” for “personal protection” in the car is another poor decision that often contributes to escalation and road rage incidents. The person who carries the “weapon” is “primed” to engage with someone whom he or she perceives to be threatening or disrespectful.

**STEP 8:** The deacon warned the two men to “*Hold it right there*” and told them, “*You’d better go back to your car.*” The other driver, according to the deacon, screamed, “*What’s your problem, you fucking asshole?*” (although the EMT’s friend stated that the EMT never uttered those inflammatory words to the deacon).

### **CHOICE POINT 8:**

The deacon made the decision to escalate the situation with his words at this point by trying to assume control and demanding that the men follow his instructions. The EMT may or may not have escalated the situation further by cursing at the deacon but, in any case, the two men in the second vehicle made the decision to continue to walk toward the deacon and his car, a poor decision on their part.

**STEP 9:** The deacon took aim with the crossbow and shot the driver of the other car in the chest with an arrow that had an expanding broadhead point, where the razor-sharp blades “fly open” as they hit the intended “target” (the arrows are designed to cause as much damage and bleeding as possible to the “prey”). The EMT gasped to his friend, “*He shot me,*” and then fell to the ground.

### **CHOICE POINT 9:**

The deacon, who later stated that he had been feeling “threatened” by the two younger men, then made the decision to aim the crossbow directly at one of the oncoming men and to pull the trigger, creating a potentially life-threatening situation.

**STEP 10:** The deacon drove away from the scene and was picked up by the police at a later time. The friend of the second driver had noted and memorized the deacon’s license plate number and drove his friend to the hospital, where the second driver died from the wound he suffered at the hands of the deacon.

### **CHOICE POINT 10:**

The two parties finally make the decision to end this horrific incident as the deacon gets back into his car after shooting the EMT and speeds away. The EMT’s friend takes him to the car after noting the deacon’s license plate number and drives his friend to the hospital and contacts the police. Calling 911 during a road rage incident is always a positive decision (as is getting the license number and make of the car, if possible). Unfortunately, in this situation, the police were notified much too late to effectively intervene in the murder that had just occurred.

## **THE AFTERMATH: THE TRIAL AND THE EVENTUAL VERDICT**

The deacon was found guilty of first degree murder “with extreme cruelty and atrocity” and given a life sentence in prison with no possibility of parole, which he is currently serving at the Cedar Junction Massachusetts State Prison. He continued to insist that he was only defending himself against “*two bigger and younger men.*” He argued that he did nothing wrong and stated, “*I will not apologize for defending my wife and defending my own life.*” After the verdict, his wife, whom he had vowed to protect in this road rage incident, filed for divorce. The deacon had no prior history of problems with the law nor were any other significant anger issues reported or acknowledged.