



Roadside Safety: a Moral Obligation



By Robert Legato, SRWA

At the risk of stereotyping myself and compromising your opinion of all that I say, I will tell you that one of my favorite movies is *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Now before you write me off as a “fringe lunatic,” let me point out that I find some wonderful philosophy inherent in all the nonsense that movie portrays.

One of the most memorable scenes is one where the gallant troop of “searchers” comes upon a troll-like individual living at the edge of a deep chasm. He asks them their favorite color. The first knight gives a reply that evidently does not please the troll and the knight is summarily cast into the chasm! The next knight is obviously afraid, so that when it comes his turn to name his favorite color, he names first “blue,” then quickly adds, “no, green!” Well, we can anticipate his fate: he is cast into the chasm just for hesitating.

What is there about this scene that jars our sensibilities? I think it is simply this: that the troll allows for no error, no leeway and no hesitation. One mistake and you’ve had it!

Let’s move now to a highway near you. It’s just been opened and winter is still upon us. Within two days the first report of a fatality hits the newspapers: a youngster traveling at 10 miles or so over the speed

limit loses his purchase on a turn and is sent careening to his death as his vehicle smashes into a cliff alongside the shoulder of the road. A few days later there's a second report: an elderly woman approaches that same turn and finds it covered with thick ice. She slows to a crawl, but a truck approaching from the rear misjudges her speed and sends her careening into that same cliff.

You are outraged, aren't you? Don't you think the designers of that road have an obligation to look ahead and create a roadside that's more forgiving? Why is that turn so sharp right at the base of a cliff? Why was the ice there? Was there proper drainage? Were no salt crews available? Were there any warning signs that a potentially dangerous situation was ahead to alert that truck driver? We're supposed to be building "Intelligent Highways," aren't we? Well, where's the "intelligence" in this case? Highway engineers have a moral obligation to design safe roads, don't they?

Yes, they do. And, I hasten to add that no one is more aware of that, generally, than the people who design and build roads. But what about the rest of us? I'm talking about the utilities that place poles and other appurtenances alongside roadways. Do we not have a similar moral obligation to create forgiving roadsides?

From our lofty perspective let's look at a situation where a vehicle has struck a pole—one of your poles—after losing control on a bend. The driver was sober, but inattentive for a moment. His outside wheel caught the soft gravel shoulder, spinning him off into the pole placed some two feet across the shoulder. "Well," you exclaim, "The shoulder should have been more stable ... and the driver should have been more

diligent!" I won't argue with you; there are all kinds of things that contribute to an accident. The bottom line is that the pole can be "made safe" for a few days; the driver wasn't as lucky.

In an ideal world, incidents such as the unstable shoulder and the pole waiting for the errant driver don't happen. In an ideal world, utility engineers work hand-in-glove with highway engineers to avoid "hazards" alongside highways.

Let's go now to your work to replace this pole. As

you went to your records, you found that the pole that was struck was placed last year. Digging back a little, you might have found that its predecessor was placed only six months before that! You put out your work order to replace the pole alongside the one that was hit. You have to apply for a highway permit and your permit is routinely granted. A day or so later, there's a lovely new "black-jack" there and the old hole has been covered over. See anything wrong with this picture?

Sure you do. What's wrong with a utility engineer that ignores previous history on a pole and continues "business as usual?" And what's wrong with a highway

engineer that rubber-stamps utility permits without a thought as to why the pole is being replaced so often?

I vividly recall an incident that occurred many years ago, when I had just become an Outside Plant Engineer for a telephone company. It was lunchtime, and a few of us engineering types had brought our lunch and had eaten at our desks. Bert was rocked back in his chair with his feet on the desk, reading a newspaper. Tom, a supervising line foreman, strode purposefully over to Bert's desk, clutching a work

