

The Turnout Concept

By Kevin McCarthy

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Anyone who chooses to live in rough and lonesome territory probably has a variety of social quirks, but these are seldom manifest in reckless driving. You either become proficient at tracking the pitch and yaw of the roads or you find yourself merging onto the ramp marked ETERNITY. And, well before reaching the big exit, edgy drivers tend to have a hard time in the winter getting neighbors to help them dig out their driveways. So it's a good idea to strive for polite and efficient mountain driving. This generally requires a thorough understanding of the turnout concept.

In challenging terrain, many roads are built in canyons, which provide nicely beveled slots of relatively navigable meanders. However, canyons are often too narrow in spots for even a single lane and some blasting is then required. There aren't many four-lane canyon roads because the extra blasting would be prohibitively expensive. Fortunately, canyons tend to vary a good deal in width, so mountain road engineers make the most of the wide spots, creating nicely graded dirt overlooks and spacious shoulders called turnouts. These are massively useful for drivers needing to get the hell out of the way.

A mountain resident who is thoroughly familiar with a route and late for work or play might want to go just a scosh faster than a newbie who is having an epiphany in a roadcut. Mountain drivers appreciate the epiphany part – we have them all the time ourselves. But we try to get the hell out of the way when we feel one coming on, or when we can plainly see that a neighbor is running late for an appendectomy. My wife and I once missed a flight to Hawaii when a canyon embolism brought a jolly cruise to the airport to a screeching crawl. (Yes, we should've left earlier, but syncing mountain caretakers warps time and space.) One bogey can generally be outmaneuvered, but add one or two *OhGodICan'tPassInTheMountains!* wingmen and everybody's goin' down. Or not. Our self-appointed wagonmaster seemed happy to ensure that no one in our pathetic caravan would get anywhere soon.

When a vehicle looms in the rearview, it's generally a bad idea to slow down, move to the middle of the road, or otherwise behave in a smug, smartypants manner. If the tailgater is truly a maniac, you might as well let him go kill someone else. Far more often it's just Weird Frank who's scalded his tender regions with coffee again. Turnouts are the pressure relief valves of mountain roads. They preserve friendships. I figure I get the hell out of the way about ten times as often as I ask anyone else to, so it all works out. If I'm hot to trot, I try to make my intent known, then back off and wait for the mountain driver's friend, the turnout. If the nudgee turns out to be a sanctimonious blockhead, so be it. Years ago, I retired all impulsive gestures in favor of the universal friendly wave.

PS - Tolerances are understandably narrower in neighborhoods, so the best approach there is to cool your jets regardless of circumstance. Mountain people devise lots of creative ways to slow or stop anything that might endanger kids or animals. It's best not to discover what those are.