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Three Degrees of Separation

On your motorcycle, your riding strategy, physical skills, and protective gear—in that order—are what separate you from the ground. These are the three degrees of separation. By themselves, each of the three degrees can save you. Combined, they create a nearly impenetrable defense against the hazards motorcyclists face every day.

Riding strategy is your first degree of separation, because mental skills, as you know, make up 90% of everyday riding. One hundred percent attention to your surroundings, accurate detection and perception of road hazards and risks, and sound judgment and decision making are the primary keys of a good riding strategy.

Attitude also plays a part. Taking responsibility for your own actions is easy, but because you, the motorcyclist, will more likely suffer bodily harm in the event of a crash, then you, the motorcyclist, must take responsibility for everyone else's actions as well. This means being tuned into not only your self, your bike, and your environment, but also being aware of other drivers, correctly anticipating their behavior, and effectively avoiding hazards before they place you at risk. Ideally, a skilled rider avoids hazards before they even become hazards.

Physical skills are your second degree of separation. You acquire them through training and they require constant practice to keep them sharp. Though they make up only a small percentage of everyday riding, when you really need them, they instantly become 90% of your survival. When something breaks through your mental barrier (as any hazard worth its weight is prone to do), instinct, self-preservation, and adrenaline have to take over. At these moments, if your physical response isn't the correct one, you'll immediately need to rely on your third degree of separation: protective gear.

Protective riding gear is your backup in case your first two lines of defense crumble. When something finds its way past your first two barriers, what you're wearing is all you have left. It's technically a combination of the first and second degrees. Mentally, it falls under preparation. Physically, it protects you from the ravages of the pavement and the elements such as heat, wind, rain and cold that can affect your ability to (mentally again) concentrate and operate the bike.

In theory, your mental strategy can protect you from everything. For those times when your brain can't save you, your physical skills and ability to control your motorcycle are your backup plan. What your mind and skills can't protect you from, your riding gear has to. Each degree of separation can stand on its own, but each is far more potent when combined with the others.

Let's look at an example of the three degrees of separation:

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Meet Veemax Vince. Vince loves his bike. He uses it for commuting, transportation, traveling, and recreation. He likes the way he looks on his bike. He likes the way it makes him feel.

Unfortunately, Vince doesn't use a riding strategy, has never taken rider training, doesn't practice anything, and doesn't wear protective gear. He just likes to ride, but genuinely thinks he knows how to handle his bike. Besides, he's ridden for two years without an accident. He knows what he's doing. Right?

One day, Vince is on his way home from work. It's 4:30, summer, the sun's shining, and the traffic is typical for rush-hour. He's wearing penny loafers, slacks, a shirt and tie, and sunglasses. He's riding down Last Chance Avenue, an urban four-laner that has no median, stop lights every four blocks, and a 30 mph speed limit. There's no parking on either side of the street, and gas stations, liquor stores, motels, and apartment buildings are spaced evenly apart. Vince is five minutes from work and five minutes from home.

Vince approaches a four-way intersection. He's got the green light and he's in the left lane. His plan (if you could call it that) is cruising straight on through at 30 mph. On the far right corner of the intersection is a convenience store. In the right lane, in front of the convenience store, is a big delivery truck, parked illegally, with its flashers on. The truck is blocking Vince's view of the store's exit.

The truck is also blocking the view of Sherry Cavalier, the woman trying to turn left out of the convenience store, behind the truck. She takes a slug of her Coke, sets it down, looks left and right, doesn't see anyone coming, and pulls out—right in front of Vince. Vince's eyes grow as big as saucers, and he panics. He grabs a big handful of front brake and stomps on the rear. Sherry suddenly sees Vince, her eyes grow as big as saucers, and she panics. She slams on her brakes and stops directly in his path.

Vince's ride is over. He slides, both tires locked and smoking, into Sherry's left-front fender at about 20 mph. He is thrown from his bike, and he vaults over Sherry's hood and lands on the blacktop on his head and forearms.

Twenty minutes later, Vince is on his way to the hospital, in a coma, with a fractured skull, broken hand, broken wrist, and snapped collar bone. He's got multiple lacerations on his arms and chest, and a heapin' helpin' of road rash. His bike is bent in half and lying in a pool of gas and oil. Sherry, after giving her tearful statement to the police, drives home with a bent front wheel and crushed fender, sipping the Coke she bought forty minutes ago. It's still cold.

Was there something Vince could've done to prevent this? Yes. There were a number of things he could've done:

If he'd been using a riding strategy, he would've been more cautious riding through the intersection. He would've known the most dangerous place for a motorcyclist is an intersection. He might have slowed down, and covered his brakes and clutch to reduce his reaction time. He may have noticed the big blind spot created by the delivery truck, and slowed even more or adjusted his position to accommodate it.

If he'd taken rider training, he'd have known how to use his brakes properly, and possibly been able to stop, or slow his bike enough to avoid the crash with a quick swerve.

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