

Science Education: A Parable

I am a retired professor of physics. I bought a 2012 sports car so I would enjoy the few miles left in me. The car is modestly high end, with one of the smaller horsepower (hp) engines made by the manufacturer. Who needs 400 hp and the ability to quickly reach 180 mph? At a bit under 300 hp, I can rapidly accelerate to any safe speed.

I was returning home from a visit to the dentist. I was on one of those wide urban thoroughfares that has two lanes going west, two lanes going east and a middle lane for turners. I was at a red light in modest traffic. When the light changed, I accelerated rapidly and left everyone in my wake. My car is designed to growl, even roar, when rapidly accelerating. This amuses me and some of the other drivers. Then I saw the red and blue flashing lights in the rear view mirror, and heard several siren blasts right behind me.

I pulled over.

Officer: “Drivers license and registration please!”

Me: “What seems to be the problem, officer?”

Officer; “You were speeding back there.”

Me: “No Sir!! I was *accelerating*, not *speeding*! I never exceeded the speed limit, and as far as I know there is no such thing as an acceleration limit!”

The officer paused, checked the computer record in his patrol car, and returned to my car.

Officer: “You are absolutely right; have a nice day.”

Imagine the outcome if this patrolman had not had at least an introductory physics course during his education. He might have resented my “talking gibberish” , that is, arguing my case (“back-talking”) and left me frustrated, holding a ticket.

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January 26, 2013