

The True Red Chronicles:

On The Importance of Understanding True Red and Truly Classy Silver and Related Family Phenomena

(Humor)

©Robert P. Strauss
Professor of Economics
& Public Policy
Carnegie-Mellon University
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213-3890
rpstrauss@att.net

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For older parents, especially with children in college, learning from them about the latest and greatest in science and technology, is axiomatic. Not only do the kids find new ways to fulfill their wants by devising schemes to get their parents to finance the latest and greatest personal computer, they now use claims of needing cutting edge technology to justify parental parting with even larger amounts of cash. How else do parents really learn except by financing their children's central needs?

Consider my 19 year old son's emerging transportation needs, and the importance attached to getting a new car that is True Red. No self-respecting father would want his only son to drive an automobile that would be scoffed at by college coeds, let alone his manly friends.

But why does he want a car that is True Red? Just what is True Red?

According to my son, there is now theoretical and empirical support for the proposition in advanced engineering physics that True Red cars go faster than cars of other colors. Indeed, there is recent empirical evidence of a likely new speed constant. A Bright Rally Red 2002 Z-28 Camaro Coupe with the 5.7 liter engine has been clocked at 120 MPH while standing still, and has been declared the new True Red Speed Standard. My son claims that the convertible version of this True Red standard is somewhat slower (114MPH) due to the heavier weight of convertibles. This, he claims, is a blessing because it is well known that convertibles are less safe than coupes, while at the same time more expensive. Therefore, he argues that I should be grateful that he requires not only the fastest True Red car, but in so fulfilling his transportation needs [fantasies?] I am not only saving money, but also taking automobile safety, his health and well being, into active consideration. Typically at this point my loving wife weighs in that the coupe is the better deal.

This new constant in the positive numeric domain raises many questions that my son has yet to answer to my full satisfaction. He and I both agree that the mandatory hair color for a college coed True Red car driver is blonde, either natural or bottled. The converse, that no self-respecting college coed, owner of a 2002 Z-28 Camaro, would color her hair other than blonde, has important implications not only for the hair stylists of America, but also the parents of blonde daughters. My son's friends routinely state that, while a college blond coed may not exceed the speed of True Red if she is driving the Speed Standard, she will be attracted to young men who drive True Red cars themselves. Importantly, there is some experimental evidence from San Diego County, California, reported in a recent *Car and Driver*, that the speed of a True Red car with a college blond coed in the passenger seat was 12% above the theoretical maximum.

Since teen age drivers who choose to drive with baseball caps (ball-caps for the remainder of this essay) seem to drive faster, and those who wear their ball-caps in reverse to protect their necks from sun burns [why else?] drive faster yet, questions arise whether or not a college age driver of a True Red car can experience a speed gain in excess of the True Red standard by wearing a ball- cap, or even a reverse ball-cap. My son, who escaped being a ball-cap teenager for unknown reasons, provides several opinions on this matter.

First, it is factual that the True Red Standard is along the real line, which means that there are other color-car combinations that are slower. Second, whether the speed of True Red can be empirically exceeded is the subject of debate and scientific dispute. He suggests that the National Science Foundation or the Society of Automotive Engineers open up a funded directorate to address this important issue. My son further observes that when he wears a ball-cap, either traditional or reverse, there is no evidence that the True Red Speed Standard is exceeded. However, on those occasions when he put the ball-cap on the ledge under the rear window, with beak pointing out to display to the driver behind the Pittsburgh Pirates "P" hat, he noted a 10% gain in the speed of a True Red Car he demo-ed at the local Chevy dealer.

So what lies to the left of the True Red car along the real line? What lies at zero?

Here our 16 year old daughter, with driving permit but not license yet in hand, has related but different opinions from my son that my son grudgingly respects. You must understand her position that choosing a car based on the True Red Standard is an entirely male thing. Real women are not impressed by speed, but by cars that meet the Truly Classy Color standard. Here she opines that there is substantial evidence in support of Truly Classy Black, and Truly Classy Silver. Unhappily for my bank account, only BMW and Mercedes meet the Truly Classy Color Standard. Perhaps like Woodward and Bernstein, she already understands the importance of "follow the money." She did take advanced social studies this past year.

Unlike her big brother, she is not so dogmatic to believe there is one standard for guys and another for gals. Choice of a car, she says, is a two dimensional problem: finding the Truly Classy Color and finding out what the car is on the True Red Standard real line. She is emphatic, for example, that there are many types of silver cars that move immediately to the zero origin for both dimensions. In particular, the 1986 Toyota Corolla, donated to our household by my 91 year old mother when she decided to retire some years ago from the streets of suburban Cleveland, qualifies as a zero in the mind of our daughter. Since at 16 she has an expressed need for a Truly Classy Colored car, the zero rating of the 1986 Corolla is more than a passing matter. In fact, she takes the position that she will never be seen driving this vehicle, either because it is not reliable or because it is too slow. Currently she is driving [with her mother] in our forest green minivan. At five feet even, her presence behind the wheel can be easily missed which may be operationally equivalent to driving the Corolla.

Friends my age think I should hold the line on the silver, 1986 Corolla [with rust-orange highlights here and there], which sadly sits un-driven in our garage. They predict that even a highly opinionated 16 year old, faced with the choice, Friday night, of staying in her [messy] bedroom, or venturing out with girlfriends once her license is secured, will lower her color and automotive standards as long as gas, oil, and insurance remain on dad.

There are, other, historical reasons why the 1986 Corolla sits un-driven in our garage, and that may explain why our youngest eschews it as a practical means of transportation. Our oldest daughter, now 22, was the first driver of the Corolla, and may have ascribed to both of the above automotive standards without letting us in on her scientific discoveries. After she was given, a few years ago, the keys to the Corolla to meet her college transportation needs, the once reliable, trusty and fuel efficient little car began to leave her stranded and frantically calling home from far away places in the early AM on her family supported cell phone. No

matter that she figured out how to put 50,000 miles on it in 2 years, sometimes choosing the open road rather than attending classes or doing her homework. Thus for safety and reliability considerations, dad was coerced into finding a used, *red* 1999 Stratus with moderate mileage.

Whether or not the Stratus is True Red is a matter of active dispute. Our youngest adamantly states that even if it is True Red, it is certainly not Truly Classy Black or Truly Classy Silver, and thus not a transportation resource she should be expected to share. Not surprisingly, older and younger sister agree on this sharing point, which makes me wonder in turn about the possibility of collusion on the scientific matter of what is really a Classy Color.

But I digress from my son's plight. Last weekend, we were passed by a red Corvette coupe of recent vintage. My son observed that, while it was not really True Red in color [it must have been a couple of years old], he would settle for something like that if my purchasing the True Red Car of choice, the 2002 Z-28, was too expensive. I thanked him for his concerns about my financial position, but explained that a used Corvette would set me back more than a new True Red car. He apologized, though I had the feeling that, once again, he was way ahead of me in reasoning this through.

There remains the awkward matter of how law enforcement views cars capable of meeting or exceeding the True Red Standard. Everyone in the family agrees that anybody driving this year's True Red car [the 2002 Z-28 with the 5.7 liter engine] must drive with their foot on the brake pedal AND with the parking brake on, or run the risk of attracting the color sensitive speed radar now being used by law enforcement, and paying huge speeding tickets. It is a natural law that the guys lucky enough to drive a True Red car are never able to achieve the immunity from radar detection and prosecution typically granted to college blonde coeds driving the same car.

Therein lies the ultimate dilemma for loving parents of driving age children. Should parents accede to their children's need for a True Red and/or Truly Classy Color car, and watch them lose their license for speeding violations, or give them something slower and more mundane which will keep them on the streets, but fail them in terms of improving their social standing?

Perhaps parents are better off never really understanding the technological and scientific importance of True Red or Truly Classy Silver, and through ignorance can be freed of spending large sums of money to solve such problems. Since the above experiences may well be universal in character, if not detail, what is a loving parent's final line of defense when reminded about these important matters? One approach that I use most generally these days is to simply to state that I forgot. And when reminded, I forget again!

True Red II: July 26, 2003

Since writing the above essay and sending it to friends around the country, I have learned from others with transportation-challenged kids that there are yet additional theories [stories?] that inventive college-age children devise with the hope of inducing parents to transfer large sums of money to smiling new/used car dealers. Also, my loving wife observed, after reading *True Red*, that I ignored the argument presented below by our own children, and did not forget it as I often proclaim. She suggested I write it down, along with other observations on these universal matters.

Additional Arguments for Meeting the Transportation Needs of Daughters in College --- Considerations of the Safety and Honor of College Coeds

A graduate school compatriot from many years ago, now a chaired professor at Northwestern ago, remarked that there were indeed other forms of entreaty that he and his wife experienced that warranted

documentation. Evidently daughters who attended Yale have found something better than the technological inferiority and social standing ploys I documented last year. It is said that at Yale there is an 87% success rate when a coed whines to her parents that her *personal safety* or *honor* are at risk unless she has her own reliable means of transportation.

For those who have never had the pleasure of walking around New Haven, Connecticut [in the daytime I advise], it has more police call boxes per running foot of campus sidewalk than any other city campus in the US. In August of 2000, on a quiet Sunday morning while walking around with my sleepy, grouchy son, I measured the intervals at one every 100 feet.

One may reasonably ask why Yale would spend so much on phone technology. To the uninitiated into the complexities of academic life, the hallmark of successful higher education administration is to hide actual justifications for an action from all possible stakeholders.

There are competing explanations for the multitude of call boxes around and in the Yale campus: first, their President holds a doctorate and is a Yale trained economist. It is imaginable that he convinced his trustees and parents that it was cheaper to substitute capital for labor (cops). Alternatively, it is possible that one of the trustees is in the police call box business, and either donated the equipment or ensured that the business went his way. Either way, it is obvious that providing tangible evidence of Yale's concern for its students was in the not too distant past paramount. Some wags at Carnegie-Mellon argue that news that applicants to our College of Fine Arts and Yale's School of Drama preferred us to them at 3:1 ratios forced the hand of Yale's Trustees to do something about safety on campus. It's hard to test the veracity of my colleagues' claim since it is obviously self-serving.

Of course, the presence of such bountiful technology raises the question of who or what is at the other end of these many call boxes. Said daughter argued for 2 and ½ years to her parents that her personal safety [honor?] was challenged every night when departing for the library or evening pizza, and that her parents' indifference might preclude their ever visiting the grandchildren if she ever decided to give her hand to the perfect man and have the perfect family. The second stage of that threat apparently had to do with important books on reserve in the library that could only be read there in the evening, and the correlative threat that without suitable transportation her grades would suffer.

What my colleague and his wife did in face of such blatant blackmail remains a matter of confusion; he certainly did not answer the question clearly upon my first enquiry. He mumbled something to the effect that I should speak to his wife, the professor of medicine. It sounded like the united front parents strive for was overwhelmed by the fear of never being able to see grandchildren yet to be born or the fear that their daughter would flunk out because she didn't get a car. Finally, something about a yellow Mustang convertible came out of the discussion with timing coincident with graduation. Not only was separate or joint parental financing unclear, but how the transportation gift related to the preservation of her safety or grades defied logic as I understand it, for it seemed she got the convertible as she was leaving Yale, and only if she did so with diploma in hand.

I should hasten to add that not all parents succumb to this safety argument, and I feel compelled in these difficult economic times to report other parental responses. Those of one of my current undergraduate research assistants evidently advised her to stay indoors at night as a way to protect her purse, backpack, laptop, and honor, and use the Internet to do her studies rather than try to get to our library unscathed with a grade point average worthy of their continued support for our remarkable tuition levels.

There are two related matters that arose after I penned [typed actually] the True Red essay last August that likely will resonate with many. Here, I invite readers to report back to me by email on what they believe is the *World's Record for Parking Tickets*, and the *World's Record for Cell Phone Bills*.

What is the World's Record for Parking Tickets: 18-22 Age Group?

As parents who have caved to the transportation demands of their progeny ultimately discover, there is a real downside risk to retaining title of whatever you finally give them. This knowledge predictably comes the hard way, through experience and likely family friction if not hysteria, rather than through advance thought and preparation. Recall that the terms of the argument over the vehicle typically involve who is going to pay for insurance, and not who is going to retain title. Mistakenly, most of us get sufficiently angry about having to provide our loving children with what we never had at their age, a functioning car, that we find the notion of keeping title in our name to be our right if not just revenge. What we forgot, and find out, when opening the mail, is that with title to their car come ongoing responsibilities for us. Technology and the reach of interstate laws have enabled parking authorities from near and far to find us to finance the legal infractions of our kids when they are both out of sight and out of mind. Once again, the kids are way ahead of us.

So, what do you think the World's Record for Parking Tickets is? Until last summer, I thought our oldest \$410 infraction in the City of Pittsburgh, which did include \$150 for towing, was not only the World's Record, but one that would stand the test of time. What other city in America would bump up tickets to \$40 in the flash of our bankrupt Mayor's eye? Read on.

A summer, 2002 research assistant who attended Cornell, in rural Ithaca, New York, blithely observed that her girlfriend had run up \$1,047.20 in Ithaca over the course of three years, and held the world's record for parking tickets. Aghast, I enquired if her parents excommunicated the errant daughter from Christmas dinner, and retrieved the vehicle for use as a mobile metal sculpture in their Long Island, New York driveway. I then followed up with a query about whether or not this parking ticket goddess had paid the tickets to receive her diploma from Cornell. Once again, I was reminded that I didn't understand how it worked. These were *Ithaca* tickets, not *Cornell* tickets, and the City had yet to learn that they could sell the outstanding parking tickets to the collection agency that buys the New York Department of Transportation title database, complete with address and phone number of the owner.

The research assistant then displayed a flash of brilliance and some belligerence, and asked how I knew about links between outstanding financial obligations and marching at graduation. She enquired if I ever had run-ins with campus parking administrators. She pushed hard and demanded I explained my parking conduct in college and graduate school.

"Three points to keep in mind," I retorted. "First, I bought my first car with summer money earned after my senior year at Michigan. I assembled truck tie rods for Ford, and God help the poor suckers who bought those trucks. They assembly machine was four times my age and always broke down itself."

Evidently no dummy, she then accused me of simply trying to distract her to avoid answering her very legitimate question. Upon being threatened with the destruction of three weeks of spreadsheet work, unless I fessed up, I finally admitted that during the Spring of my third and final year of graduate school in Madison, Wisconsin, where it gets -45 F in the Winter, my \$150 VW beetle disappeared from campus one day [illegally parked I confess], and showed up in the secure lot of the University of Wisconsin Campus Police. I was faced with both walking in the cold and coming up with \$91 --- princely sum in 1969. Also, I discovered, upon closely reading the rules, that I faced the distant threat of not being able to formally obtain my Ph.D. Given my need to get to the Madison airport in order to fly to job interviews, the worrisome state of US international relations at that time, and my personal commitment to educating the young about the intricacies of public finance and labor economics rather becoming a M-16 trainee, I needed a solution.

The Regents of the University of Wisconsin, unlike the management at Carnegie-Mellon, viewed matters such as the resolution of disputes over campus parking tickets given to students to be the proper domain of something called Student Court. There, the notion of trial by one's peers was held sacred. At Carnegie-Mellon, parking infractions are the domain of the Traffic Division of the Campus Police, who, through Campus Police, report to the Vice President for Enrollment, who reports to the President of the University, and who in turn reports to the Trustees of the University.

The Trustees of Carnegie-Mellon, benefactors in every sense of the word, run our non-profit corporation in quite private and mysterious ways. What is certain here is that these captains of industry view campus parking as a profit center, and insist that if parking infractions are not paid, Dallas boots are to be attached to the offending cars, and paychecks of the owners are to get ultimately docked by our wondrous, integrated Oracle Financial Management System. It appears that I had more procedural rights as a graduate student at Wisconsin 30 years ago than I do as a tenured professor at CMU now.

What did I do so many years ago she impatiently asked?

While not a campus activist as a graduate student at Wisconsin [my political activities were limited to badgering the faculty to hire the best new faculty as possible in order to ensure the value of my diploma], it turned out that I did know the Chief Justice, an undergraduate economics major as I distantly recall. Unfortunately, a phone call and beers at the Student Union could not persuade him to meter out limited or favorable justice; indeed, he raised the specter of additional penalty for trying to influence a member of the esteemed Student Court. I reminded him that he agreed to partake of the beers in the Student Union, and was forewarned by phone of the impending topic of conversation. "I'm economics AND pre-law," he proclaimed, and went on to explain that his life's goal was to become an appointed not elected judge. Faced with the certainty of his plans and rejection of my various arguments about needing to attend class in a timely manner, the unreliability of the Madison buses etc., I followed his judicious advice and paid the tickets.

My assistant then simply branded me a hypocrite. To which I reminded her, Second, that I had title to the Beetle, and worked my way through graduate school, walked up Bascomb Hill (at a 45 degree incline as I recall) in the worst days of winter to get my education, and, Third, I paid the tickets with hard earned cash from *two* simultaneous research assistantships my third and final year in graduate school.

[Upon reading this addition to the True Red Chronicles, my youngest daughter reminded me that my research assistant never managed to elicit a more current history of my parking indiscretions at my place of employment. To which I responded that I don't remember any such events.]

What is the World's Record for Cell Phone Bills: Age Group 22-26?

One of the necessities of life for a professor at a high pressure private university is to periodically escape the immediate environs of one's academic colleagues and campus acquaintances. In small college towns this becomes impossible, and life often deteriorates quickly for the unimaginative. In more populous areas, however, there is the refuge of suburban life, and the camaraderie afforded by one's tennis club. Men from different walks of life, drawn by the need to smack the ball and run around for an hour and one half each week, bond and ultimately commiserate about the latest mischief of their kids at college.

Inevitably talk turns to the shopping list one is confronted with by child and wife before that fateful drive in August back to campus. One tennis friend, an Iranian pizza magnate of some consequence, related to me both how proud and how annoyed he got with his oldest daughter. Graduating in 3 years from Michigan's honor college, but in English with a French minor and few prospects of gainful employment, her academic

accomplishments were matched only by her total ability to spend whatever hard earned monies showed up in her checking account each month. One evening he was particularly forlorn and agitated with this princess.

He turned to me, and asked. "You gave your kids cell phones, right?" I admitted to this, and quickly blamed my wife whose need to bed check our kids seemed unprecedented. "Aha," he said. "Now, what was your daughter's highest monthly bill?" Did he mean parking tickets or what? "No, the cell phone, dammit." Uh, Oh, I thought, he must have just gotten his Verizon bill. "Cell phone? For our oldest I don't think it ever went beyond \$45.00. But my wife pays it, ...who knows?"

Pain flashed across his face, and he turned to me and whispered, "...would you believe \$535 3 months ago?: I gasped, "What did you do?"

"Here's the silver lining," he said with a big smile. "She was so embarrassed she got a job waiting tables, and paid it off herself in 3 weeks."

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