

Ralph's Accident Reconstruction Newsletter

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twice the speed limit, collision is unavoidable. After the inevitable crash, the driver of the struck vehicle is likely to say, "I never saw <insert description of speeding object>." If one could replay the memory like replaying a video tape, one would observe that the striking object was there among the other objects but was not discerned as a hazard because, at that distance, accurately judging the speed of a vehicle coming toward you is very difficult, if not impossible. The vehicle which struck that driver was there in plain sight but made no distinct mental impression because it was not perceived as a hazard under those circumstances.

Another unreliable aspect of human factors is memory. Although a few people may be blessed with perfect memory, most of us have fallible memories. It is also an observed and normal characteristic of human memory, especially when there is some associated traumatic event, for our minds to replay the event repeatedly, sometimes altering the sequence or conditions to suit something we would have desired or preferred to have happened. Not that we have any intention of deception, just a normal human tendency to "rethink" situations to our advantage. That is why a witness or participant statement taken as closely as possible to the date and time of an event is more likely to be an accurate account of the sequence of events. Months later, that witness may "remember" a significant number of new or additional elements of the sequence which were not part of the original statement and are often not supported by any physical evidence. These and similar tendencies have been documented repeatedly by psychologists and other researchers in numerous tests and studies conducted at facilities all over the world.

Our eyes don't really play tricks on us, but it's a common expression; sight is a mental process, and our minds can play tricks on us, both in evaluating and remembering the images the eyes send to the brain. Physical evidence doesn't have those problems; it is objective and, as long as it exists, unchanging. A 120-foot pre-impact skid will always be 120 feet long. A gouge mark in the middle of a traffic lane will always be in the middle of that lane. A crush depth of 32 inches from impacting a tree can tell you how fast the car was going, if you have crush coefficients for that surface of the car. The list goes on, *ad infinitum*.

Thank you for reading this newsletter. Please call anytime you have need of any of the vehicle-related forensic consulting services I offer.

Ralph Cunningham, Inc.
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