

The Emergency Excuse

What It Is and How It Stops Us

by: John P. Foppe

I will never forget what my Dad told me as I grabbed the keys to my first car from his hand. “John, this is a magic car?”

I stepped back slightly, grimaced and skeptically asked, “What do you mean?”

“It’s a magic car if you ever have an accident or bring home a ticket...because it’ll disappear!”

On my 16th birthday, I got my driver’s license! It was a proud moment for both Dad and me.

At school, the entire campus buzzed with the news that John Foppe could drive a car with his feet. Friends came up to me and asked how I drove. The questions carried on all week:

Finally, on Friday night, I learned why my friends were so excited. They wanted me to drive them to the mall so we could park up front the handicap parking spaces! We laughed and laughed.

Our laughter soon ended, however, when I blew through a speed trap on the way home.

There we were—four mortified teens hunkered down in a Chevette splashed in the bright blue and red lights of an Illinois State Police cruiser. My friends howled and squirmed in their seats. “Settle down!” I yelled while watching, through the rearview mirror, a tall, skinny State Cop approach. Adjusting his gun belt over his hips, he said, “Son, I’ve been waitin’ for you all day.”

My stomach churned, but I had to stay cool. Sheepishly looking at the officer, I wisecracked, “I’m sorry Officer...I got here as fast as I could!” My buddies snickered.

“Oh, a smart guy!” he said while shining his flashlight into my eyes. “Let me see your driver’s license and registration.”

“Yes...yes, sir,” my voice shook.

Reaching into my shoe for my wallet with my toes, I chastised myself. *This car is going to disappear!*”

I carried the license in a plastic ID holder, which served as a wallet, and I put the ID holder in my shoe so I can access it with my feet. By now, my left foot was shaking as I tried to give him the license through the car window. Since it was night, the Officer couldn’t see that I didn’t have arms. The last thing he expected was a bare foot coming through the window at him. He jerked back on his feet and waved his flashlight around for a better look. Then he gruffly asked, “Are you playin’ some kind a game with me, Son?”

“No! No, Sir!” I pleaded. “I was born without arms. I use my feet for everything...”

He squeamishly took the license from my toes. Beads of sweat were pouring down my forehead. I couldn’t have asked for more dramatic prop to help get me out of this damning situation. I hoped the Officer would have pity on me—anything to avoid a ticket!

Fully aware that I was playing the handicap card, I brought my left foot up to my brow and wiped the sweat away. The Officer just stood there speechless. Dumbfounded, he shined his flashlight on my friends in the back seat as if expecting someone to say, “Smile! You’re on Candid Camera.” I sat still and allowed an awkward silence to fill the air. Eventually, he looked down at the license and swallowed hard. I think he just wanted out of this awkward situation. Finally, he recoiled down beside the car window. Giving back my license, he stammered, “S, So, Son, why don’t you just go on ahead?”

I tell this story in my speeches because it makes audiences laugh. Using my handicap as an excuse, however, is no joking matter. I

confess...I shrewdly used my disability to intimidate the police officer.

Similarly, I am convinced all of us have an emergency excuse we use to bail us out of a crisis. Recognizing this excuse is difficult. We unwittingly develop this powerful pretext, sometime during our childhood, when we experience our first unforgettable failure. It is the message we told ourselves to explain our failure.

With internal messages like:

- I don't fit in
- I'm not smart enough
- I'm all alone

Our emergency excuse is born.

From the moment we articulate the excuse to ourselves, we begin to live as if the pretext is true. The excuse becomes a part of us. It makes us feel special. It allows us to merely get by in life. But, it is a heavy burden.

For example, as a child, I failed at dressing myself because I didn't have arms. So, I excused my shortfall and manipulated others to help me by claiming, "I'm a special case." And, that night while pulled over on the highway, I feared taking a speeding ticket home to Dad, so I

dramatically became a "special case" to get out of the ticket.

Using an excuse to get out of a speeding ticket seems amusing and harmless. Excuses work well...that is, until we encounter something we really want. As we dream about how wonderful our life would be to achieve some ambition, we forget that we will have to invest a lot of time, energy and resources to achieve the goal. Therein lies the problem!

Our built-in emergency excuse operates on autopilot. We don't know how to turn it off. When we really want to make a sacrifice, we are undisciplined. When we want to make a commitment, we are untrustworthy. When we want to invest in something worthwhile, we are depleted. When we want to work hard, we don't have the strength. With our chips down and nothing left but our emergency excuse, out it comes like a trump card stopping us from reaching our destination.

John Foppe advises, speaks and writes about how to maintain momentum when executing initiatives. For more information, go to www.visionaryvelocity.com.

