

# SEAT BELT OPTIONAL

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, a civilization that was able to travel faster than light and build massive death stars did not have enough sense to put safety rails on the long narrow walkways they repeatedly built over wide, deep, deadly chasms. Closer to home, it is imagined that hundreds of years in the future space explorers will build particle beam transporters and holodecks, but still will not yet have invented the seat belt. “Brace for impact!” the captain of the Enterprise yells as the 46 million metric ton ship, traveling at one-quarter the speed of light, is about to crash into some even more massive body, resulting in sprained wrists and concussions among the bridge crew. Clearly, someone got a “D” in high school physics.

As absurd as that imagined past or distant future may seem, they hold a particular resonance with contemporary life. Not long ago, automakers were reluctant to supply seatbelts, airbags and back-up cameras, on the theory that consumers prefer to spend money on more powerful speakers or engines, not safer cabins. Today, the major automakers have introduced advanced safety technology as a luxury available only in the most pricey models. The technology, such as pre-collision breaking, automatic lane keeping, blind-spot monitoring and enhanced mirrors, cost manufacturers just a few hundred dollars per vehicle to install, but are available only to customers who have purchased sunroofs, leather trim, heated seats and 16-speaker stereo systems.

Instead of “safety first,” the auto manufacturers have decided safety should be a luxury item. These are the same manufacturers who have resisted simple steps to enhance fuel efficiency – or lied about it – and steps to reduce the pollution created by their products.

This may seem merely a middle-class complaint, the gripe of someone who can afford a new \$20,000 or \$30,000 vehicle but does not want to, or cannot, cough up another \$10,000 or \$20,000 to get the sunroof and leather required before manufacturers will offer the advanced safety options. Still, over 15,000,000 new light vehicles have hit the road in America in 2015, and a lot more of them had sunroofs than pre-collision breaking, which means thousands of preventable deaths will occur because of this corporate marketing decision and lack of regulation. Those less-safe vehicles will be bought used by those with less resources,

and more of them will die.

Worse, the harm of the industry’s attitude may be greater in other countries. In Mexico, GM and other manufacturers leave out airbags, life-saving devices that would cost only \$100 a pair to install in a new vehicle. They are omitted because Mexican law does not require them (Gautham Nagesh, *Wall Street Journal* 27.12.2015). The math is simple; how much is a Mexican worth?

That is not to mention trucks. In spending \$150,000 on a new truck, a few hundred dollars more would provide a system to alert the driver and take steps to prevent frontal collision, in case the driver’s attention has turned to an important text message while approaching stalled traffic, or is napping, both common deadly scenarios. Given the cost of insurance and collisions, and the toll in lost or diminished lives, you’d think it was a no-brainer. But manufacturers are promoting instead dual chrome stacks and leather, Congress has rolled back safety regulations, and “the trucking industry has resisted most of those safety devices” (Howard Abramson, *New York Times*, 21.08.2015). Reportedly, “... only about 3 percent of the Class 8 trucks — the heaviest ones, including most tractor-trailers — are equipped with any version of this collision-avoidance technology, according to safety advocates.”

While star-ship crashes are rare, and only people carrying light-sabers traverse unguarded narrow catwalks over chasms, more than 30,000 people die annually in the United States in vehicle collisions and a much larger number suffer painful and life-diminishing injury. The magnitude of this carnage dwarfs that of political or religious terrorism, aviation disasters, or wild bear attacks. Failing to use available simple remedies is a moral atrocity. The corporate policy is morally reprehensible and the absence of regulation is a failure of democracy.

כִּי תִבְנֶה בַּיִת חֲדָשׁ וְעָשִׂיתָ מַעֲקֵה לְגִגְתְּךָ  
וְלֹא־תִשִּׂים דְּמַיִם בְּבֵיתְךָ כִּי־יִפֹּל הַנֶּפֶל מִמֶּנּוּ:

When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.

Deuteronomy 22:8