



BY NICOLE PISCOPO NEAL | *Palm Beach Post, Fla.*

The big story in the morning's paper involved a dentist who had taken his toddler to work for the day — a special treat for the boy — and forgotten him in the car. It was July in South Florida, and by the time the man realized what had happened, his son was dead. The outrage was so strong that it caught me by surprise. This column generated a lot of mail — some supportive and some not. (My favorite letter to the editor suggested I be forced to write my columns in a locked car.)

Mourn for the child — and his preoccupied dad

HE SHOULD BE FRIED! HE SHOULD be strung up! He should be locked in a car until he suffocates!

Those are just a few of the comments I overheard while getting coffee at the office Friday morning. People are outraged at Dr. Dennis Sierra, the Boca Raton dentist whose 3-year-old son died Thursday in the back seat of the family's SUV, left in the car and forgotten after his father went in to work.

My first thought was for the little boy - what a horrible way to die. But very quickly I felt just as bad for Dr. Sierra. Because I believe that it is by such a slim thread of grace that we make it through each day avoiding tragedy.

I can feel the wind being generated by thousands of jerking knees: How can anyone defend someone who forgot his own child in the back seat of a car on a sweltering July morning?! How self involved do you have to be to do something so thoughtless?

But I have to wonder, when the righteous indignation deflates, how many people will be left letting out a deep, grateful sigh of relief. Because how many times have we done something colossally stupid, only to be saved by sheer luck or divine intervention?

How many times have we been genuinely reckless, maybe pulling into traffic without really checking, causing a near collision and then scolding ourselves: "That was stupid. I could have killed someone. I have to slow down and think." Yes, there are a thousand first stones

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we should cast right back at ourselves.

And there's this realization: If you work in a job that is at all absorbing, or even live a life that is at all frenzied, you might have read about Dr. Sierra's tragic mistake and thought, "I could see that happening to me."

"There's no socioeconomic pattern to leaving a child in a car," said Michelle Struttmann of the nonprofit Kids In Cars, which keeps track of deaths and accidents involving children in non-moving vehicles. "We had someone from NASA do it a couple of years ago, and his child died. It's scientists to waitresses."

Most of the time, she said, they simply forget the child is back there.

"People are in just such a hurry."

And so much of that hurry is numbing routine. Up for breakfast. Walk the dog. Get dressed. Drive to work. Park the car. Go inside. We're on automatic pilot, year after year, mov-

ing through our mornings very often unable to remember anything that happened in them.

If on one occasion, though, something threw off our routine, but that something was quiet and unobtrusive and maybe asleep in the back seat, isn't it possible that any one of us might have walked away from our car and into our workplace and quickly gotten absorbed into our normal day? There is, after all, that other world we enter when we step into our offices. We get pulled into a conversation, a project, a problem - and before we know it, eight hours have gone by. Does this make us bad people? Or does this make us just people?

Some will surely say: "All true, but we're talking about a little boy. How can someone forget his own child?!"

But we forget our children all the time. Who hasn't gotten caught up browsing through a rack of clothes, and then turned to find her kid gone? Who hasn't realized just in time that they forgot to close the screen door leading to the swimming pool, or left a burner on, the cleaning cabinet open, the front gate unlatched?

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Mourn for the little boy, of course. But mourn for Dr. Sierra, as well. No matter what charges he may face, his suffering will know no end.