

Chapter 56

Jeep Driving Lessons

We appointed Sister Maria as the spiritual director of our house. She was a nurse and a nutritionist. She was born in a village about an hour's drive away. She was not a driver.

"David," she would always say, "Teach me to drive the jeep!"

"When there is time," I would say to her, "I will try to find time." I had her drive about a half block once. She couldn't figure which way to turn the steering wheel to turn left. "I could teach her to drive," I thought, "But I might endanger too many people in the process."

"Today," she said, "Today would be good... when I finish at the nutrition center..."

"I'll do it sometime," I laughed, "when I think I need more pain in my life!"

She thought she could learn to drive by watching me drive. That's why she accompanied me to the villages sometimes. "Why do you do this?" she would ask. "Why do you do that?" she would ask. She was constantly reporting my speed to me. It was a little unnerving.

I paid her back by doing things as I drove that had no meaning whatsoever for her to watch. Once in a remote village, I was talking to her as I cruised through a street intersection a little fast...

"David, You didn't look to see if something was coming! Did you?"

"No, I didn't look," I said, "Why? Is that important?"

"Yes, it's important. We could have been killed!" she said.

"No Maria," I explained, "There is only one car in this village... and we are in it! Explain to me how we could hit that one car that is in this village, and that we are inside of."

Eventually it happened that during a weak moment I may have promised to begin giving her driving lessons. "We will begin by having you practice washing the jeep," I announced, "Then we will have you rotate the tires."

In your dreams,” she said, arms folded.

We went out on the soccer field to begin with basics. “First we are going to teach you steering. When you learn that, we can practice on some of the back streets.”

We spent the whole afternoon practicing a very simple concept, “Turn the wheel to the right, when you want to turn right.” When she just couldn’t grasp that, I tried another concept.

“Turn the wheel to the left, when you want to turn left, Maria” It just wasn’t working. “Tell me what you are thinking when you want to make a turn,” I said finally.

“When you say to turn left,” she began, “I never can remember if I should move the top of the wheel to the left... or the bottom of the wheel to the left.” I really tried very hard to keep a straight face as the inside of me wanted to laugh.

I got out of the jeep, went into the back, and got some red electrical tape out of my toolbox, Then I came around to the driver’s side and wrapped red tape around the top of the wheel.

“See that red tape, Sister?” I asked. She nodded. “That red tape is what you move to the right or to the left.” It was like the lights came on in her mind.

“Let’s try it!” she said full of hope. It was like a miracle. She was now able to turn the jeep in the direction she wanted it to go every time. “Let’s go and drive around the village now!” she said. But it was time to end the first lesson. Besides it was getting dark already.

A few days later I had to teach her how to shift with a clutch as she was driving. The first confusing thing for her was that there were two shift levers on the floor because it was a four wheel drive jeep. She couldn’t remember if it was the big lever on the left or the shorter one on the right.

‘How will I remember which one to shift?’ she asked.

“Hand me that roll of red electrical tape there on the dash,” I said. After awhile we weren’t doing too badly. There was a lot of jerking and grinding, but I didn’t worry about that, because she could learn to replace the gears and clutches.

Then we moved to the big time. We went to a small road that wove through the little farm where there weren't many cars. It was perfect, with the fences and buildings and winding curves and short turns. "I can't remember sometimes," she said, "if I'm supposed to move the shift lever when the clutch is in or when it is out."

"You've watched me drive now for six months," I said laughing, "Just do what you saw me do thousands of times." But soon she got the hang of it a little bit. She was stopping and shifting up and then shifting down. To my surprise, she was doing these things while turning the jeep at the curves and corners in the correct direction.

Then when she was going past one of the gardens where the road curved a little to the right, she turned the wheel a little to the left. Then when the jeep didn't go to the right, she turned sharply to the left.

"Help," was all that she yelled, as we busted through the fence that runs between the road and the gardens. There are still some vibrating echoes remaining of her yell, in those mountain canyons today. There was a loud crashing and busting sound as we entered the garden area leaving the wooden and wire fence in shambles behind us. Then there was a scraping of barb-wires that scraped over the top or got caught on the windshield and stretched as we drove over the first raised carrot bed.

I could see that we had about a dozen or fifteen raised growing beds to bounce over if we were to hit the chicken coop with a decent speed.

"Maria!" I shouted, "You've got your foot on the gas, not the brake! You can't stop by pressing on the gas! You've got to press on the brake!" She was too busy to understand me as she pulled backward on the wheel and pressed even harder on the gas. By now we were grinding up our sixth raised growing bed and bouncing toward the seventh. "Maria!" I yelled, "What do you want me to do?"

"Stop the jeep!" she yelled, "Stop the jeep!"

“OK,” I yelled back and I reached up and turned off the ignition switch.

What happened back there, Sister?” I asked.

I think that darned tape fell off of the top of the wheel!” she answered.

Then she said, “You have to drive it out of here,” and started to get out.

“No,” I said, “You have to drive it out.”

“How am I going to get out of here? You drive it out of here.”

“You have to drive it out of here,” I said finally, “Because you have more experience driving in gardens than I do.”

Then she backed it out over each of the raised growing beds and through the busted place in the fence. Soon we were back on the little farm road again. It was a good opportunity to teach her to use that other little shift lever when we needed to back up through those carrot beds with four-wheel drive engaged.



I was really looking forward to teaching her to drive the hairpin turns up on the mountain road.