

# Risk and Terror

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*Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who never enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.—Theodore Roosevelt*

WHEN I LAY IN A HOSPITAL VERY BADLY INJURED from the crash of my experimental airplane, a visitor asked me if I thought my injuries were a judgment for my sins. I remember saying no, and I even remember wondering that anyone should be so silly, let alone so tactless, as to ask such a question. But I don't remember who asked it, and I don't really want to. The asker and I have some differences in philosophy and theology that are so deep and irreconcilable that it would be difficult for us to continue to be friends if those differences surfaced again.

I presume that the asker sees God watching every act and doling out immediate punishment for every infraction of divine law. Yes, I did violate a law—not a law of God, but of Nature, and as my parachutist daughter says: The law of gravity is strictly enforced. That I will accept, along with Newton's Laws of Motion, the laws of Conservation of Energy and Matter, and the First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics. Those and many other "Laws" as they have been postulated by astute observers and interpreters of Nature seem to be binding on all humankind. Whether they are binding on God, I do not presume to say. Such laws of Nature are not all obvious, and finding out what they are is sufficient purpose for existence.

Mormon theology includes a belief that before earth existence there was a rather Milton-like war in heaven. At issue was the choice of free agency versus a Satan-proposed plan that all would be compelled to do right. We are told the free agency side won the war, and as a result we all

come to earth as a stage of development in eternal progression. Even without such a theological background, I suspect I would have been inclined to free agency and choice—with the attendant risks and consequences. That inclination is probably genetic.

I know a good deal about my family history. I can see I come from a long line of question-askers and risk-takers. My first ancestor bearing the family name in America came over with Roger Williams in 1630. He immediately got in trouble in Massachusetts Bay Colony over theological issues. Family tradition says he was preaching in church and his doctrines were so offensive to the congregation that he was dragged from the pulpit by the hair of his head and thrown in jail. He was later released and accompanied Williams to Providence, a more tolerant colony. He set the pattern for the family. Since that time, no two successive generations of the family have lived in the same place. They have been pioneers on whatever frontier existed in Rhode Island, New York, Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Utah, Chihuahua, and Alberta. And for various reasons they were chased out of most of those places. My mother's people went from England to South Africa in the early part of the last century, and came to Utah in the 1850s. Thus all of my ancestors crossed the plains by wagon or handcart. Risk-takers all.

The pilot's equivalent of seeking a new frontier is what is called "expanding the envelope." Each aircraft has an "envelope of performance"—a top speed, a maximum altitude, a minimum speed before stall, a maximum positive and negative G loading, and so on. On first flying a given airplane, pilots fly conservatively near the center of the plane's envelope—and near the center of their own envelope of skill. As they gain experience, they fly closer to the edges of the aircraft's and their own envelopes. Eventually, they expand both. This is the direction of both growth and progress. For me, expanding the envelope makes a sound metaphor for life—and not incidentally coincides rather nicely with my understanding of Mormon theology.

The procedure of expanding the envelope is not necessarily foolhardy, though there is an element of risk involved. But there is a considerable difference in betting on your own ability to climb a rock cliff and playing Russian roulette. One involves confidence in your own ability. The other relies on blind chance. I might try climbing the cliff, but I certainly would not play Russian roulette. Those who do gamble on sheer chance, whether it is playing Russian roulette or the lottery, either have some kind of death or disaster wish, or alternatively they believe that God or Lady Luck holds them in special esteem and is just waiting for the opportunity to bless them. It is probably that belief that God wants to bless us if only we will provide him the mechanism that makes Mormons such ready suckers for con artists. Such foolishness. Such solipsism. Such pride.

Of course luck plays a part in what happens. However to me luck is not a personage but mathematical odds. No matter how well you control the dangerous variables, flying experimental aircraft is mathematically more dangerous than reading or knitting. Sometimes you win. Sometimes you lose. But you are certainly less likely to lose if you are skillful, and that is what the game is about—winning by skill against more and more difficult odds.

I do not rule out divine intervention. But if God put us on a hostile world so that we could learn and prove ourselves, he would interfere with his own system if he intervened very often. Protecting the worthy at all times or answering all prayers on demand would upset the balance so that the world would no longer fulfill its divine and design function of trying us. Perhaps God has to ration blessings to keep from ruining the world.

The notion of God treating us with this kind of benign neglect sounds like the deist doctrine of God winding the great watch of the world and leaving it to run by itself—the absentee landlord metaphor is commonly applied. Such a belief, however, does not necessarily require an uncaring God. Those who require their God to protect them from every slip, cast him in the role of a doting, over-protective parent whose children can never really learn what there is to learn.

I remember my own father saying that the function of parents, like the function of teachers, is to work themselves out of a job. Thus a parent's job, like a teacher's—perhaps even God's job—is essentially one of weaning. When I was seventeen, I decided that I wanted to hitchhike to Canada. My father gave me a lecture telling me to be careful about other hitchhikers and warning me about other perils on the road, and then he gave me a ride to the edge of town. The world of 1947 was less violent than the world of today, but I realize now that he knew there were risks to the enterprise. Still he let me go. There were unpredictable things that happened, like getting snowed in at Browning, Montana, where I watched my uncle win \$200 playing pinochle and getting a ride with the chief of the Idaho highway patrol. And there was that pretty girl in Lethbridge—it was a marvelous adventure.

My son Steve says cynically that adventure is someone else having a very bad time, a long ways away. But adventure is risk willingly taken. It is what makes life more than an ordeal. As Anaïs Nin says, "Life expands or contracts in proportion to one's courage." Again Mormon theology includes the concept that we can progress eventually to godhood. Adventure is only another name for that struggle for progress. Risk willingly taken is what free agency is all about—to allow us to gain the capability and the initiative to become gods. We cannot become adults, let alone gods, if we expect to be divinely coddled. Somehow we must learn to accept the

consequences of acts that are our choice. Somehow we must learn that we won that war in heaven.

Of course danger itself plays a part in the appeal of some things. A hanggliding friend used to say, "If you're not scared, you're not having fun." There can be quite an adrenalin rush to being scared. Some people find it as addictive as any drug. I was rarely scared flying Cessnas in flight training. They are safe and forgiving. They land and take off at fifty miles an hour, they have a stall warning horn that sounds if you let the airspeed get too low, and they are very stable. Transitioning from a Cessna to my Vari-Eze was like changing from a four-door Dodge to a hot-rod motorcycle. A slight twitch of the wrist on the stick could make the plane jump like a porpoise. And it landed at 90 miles an hour. I can remember many times on the early flights when I would taxi to the threshold of the runway, make my pre-flight checks, and think, "This is the day that I could get killed." Then I would open the throttle.

Later, of course, when I learned its habits, the plane no longer scared me. I delighted in its quick agility and responsiveness. Ninety-degree bank turns became routine. It was a delight to fly, but the danger, or its potential, was part of the fun. When I was no longer scared, flying was still fun, but, I admit, not as much. But there were a few times when I had all the adventure I wanted. Once the engine quit on me west of Eureka, Utah. I looked for a place to make a forced landing. There was a road within gliding distance, but it was up and down, passing through hilly and rocky terrain, with curves, cuts and fills. I managed to stretch the glide to relatively flat ground and put the plane down—on a curve and with a strong crosswind blowing the wrong way for the curve. As I skidded to a stop off the side of the road and was shutting off the fuel and turning off the switches, a woman drove up and said, "Are you all right?" "Yes," I answered weakly. Then she asked, "Is anybody picking you up?"

I cannot talk about the scaring on my final flight, because I do not remember the crash. Some kind of psychic-overload dumping apparently occurred. I confess that I have rather mixed feelings about wanting to remember. Perhaps the mind knows best what is good for it.

The nature of scaring probably deserves some comment.

The physiology and psychology of fear have been much talked about.

Writers of adventure fiction have often used the phrase, "the brassy taste of fear." Popular wisdom says accurately that those who are frightened may freeze, have dry mouths, and lose control of the bladder and bowels. I have experienced the dry mouth, but have never known the supposed brassy taste. I have not experienced loss of control of bladder or bowels either, but I have seen it. I have also seen men frozen by fear and unable to move—even when moving was needed to get out of the fearful situation. More commonly what I have felt is a kind of electric shock in the

chest. It is probably the result of suddenly-released adrenalin—the fight or flight reflex. That effect I have felt many times.

Once, when working at a smelter I was on a crew dumping cinders from a train car. The cinders looked like the clinkers from a coal-burning furnace, and ranged from golf-ball size to basket-ball size and were very ragged and still too hot to hold in your hand.

The crew tripped the dump doors in the bottom of the car, and the foreman sent two of us up on top of the car with crowbars to loosen the load so it would dump. He warned us about getting over the openings. The rest of the crew banged on the sides of the car with sledge hammers to shake the load down.

I heard the other end go, and I heard a scream. The other man had fallen through with the clinkers. I shouted to the crew to stop hammering.

The man was jammed in the bottom door, buried to his neck in clinkers, and with a four-foot bank of them above his head and a thirty-foot deep bin below him. One arm was over his head, his eyes were wide open, and he was screaming in pain and terror. I hooked one leg over the top of the car and grabbed his arm to hold him from falling through, while the rest of the crew dug him out from underneath. He passed out before we got him free. It was a fine team effort directed by a cool foreman. We literally saved his life, but none of us were really endangered in doing it.

We put him in a basket stretcher and carried him to the infirmary. The nurse cut his work clothes off and painted his many cuts, bruises, and minor burns. He'd wet his pants but had no serious injuries. When he came to, he asked for his street clothes, dressed, and went to his car and drove away. We never saw him again.

I have also seen men freeze. When I was nineteen, we were climbing into an Anasazi cliff dwelling in a side canyon off the Colorado River. The rock wall was about a 70-degree angle, and we were using handholds the Anasazi had chiseled into the sandstone hundreds of years before. It took attention, but it wasn't really scary. My buddy Loren Dunn and I were climbing easily, and so was the older man who was with us. Then the man looked down and froze. We talked to him, and he answered fairly rationally, but he could not make his arms and legs move. We had to straddle him and move his limbs one at a time to get him down. He told us after that he had been afraid of heights when he was young and had thought he was over it until he got onto the cliff. He was very embarrassed to have to be helped by a couple of kids.

When I was a boy we did a lot of that climbing, jumping across high places, and swinging on ropes—some of it I realize now was pretty foolish, but it built confidence, and none of us got badly hurt. We liked to think it was because we were skillful, but looking back, I suppose we just beat the odds. With all of the kids I grew up with, challenge was constant. Partly

we did things because we did not want to be seen as sissies, but more than that was a kind of constant testing of the others and self. We didn't know then about envelopes, but we were constantly pushing out the edges.

Years later in Ohio, a friend spun a plane in on take-off. Two of us raced our cars down the runway to the crash site. I remember parking clear of the plane, in case it should catch fire, and running to the side door. The other man broke out the skylight of the plane and unbuckled the pilot's seat belt. I pulled the pilot out. He was difficult to handle—both arms and both legs were broken—but this was no time to wait for the paramedics. Gasoline was streaming out of the tanks onto the hot engine. I remember worrying about the pilot getting burned, but my only worry for myself was that I might ruin my good leather jacket. The shakes hit me later.

It was the challenge that led me to build the plane in the first place. People have said to me often, "I wouldn't dare fly in a plane that I built." My stock answer is: "Do you trust someone else more than you trust yourself?" That stock answer rarely satisfied. Not everyone shared my enthusiasm. Still, the answer was genuinely intended. I'd never worked with the foam and fiberglass the plane was made of, but then I've done a lot of things I was not born knowing how to do. But I can read and learn how to do most anything I have a mind to learn. Glen Turner tells me he looks at a job and thinks, "Some man made that thing—I'm a man, so I should be able to make one too—maybe not as fast or perhaps not as well the first time, but eventually I can." That is a fine approach to life. People can do things—if they are willing to risk.

As I have said, flying was not the first place I had put myself at risk. There were all those barns and trees and cliffs I had climbed. At the smelter, there were scary things like tapping furnaces and rigging steel. I also rode wild horses, and once in New Mexico, I chased antelope on a Harley 74. I did not court danger, but I did not avoid doing things that seemed fun or otherwise interesting if the risks seemed manageable. In retrospect I realize that I had a thousand opportunities to get killed. I was well ahead of the odds.

When I was in the army, my boss for a time was a black from Chicago who had lied about his age and gone into the army at fourteen. When I knew him he had been in combat in Korea and had been on occupation duty in Germany. He was a Sergeant First Class and was nineteen years old. When I found that out I said, "Jimmie, you're just a boy." "Ace," he answered, "'taint the years; it's the miles." Greater wisdom I have not found in Israel.

Yes, I busted myself up, and yes there has been a great deal of pain and disability. And unfortunately I will not be able to do some of the things in my golden years that I had counted on doing, and that is too bad. I'm very sorry I crashed, but I'm not sorry I flew.