

SURVIVING RISK

By Tom Kinney

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

June 7, 2015

References: Ben Sherwood The Survivor's Club—the secrets and science that could save your life.

More info: data from FARS revealed that 21 percent of traffic fatalities were comprised of people who were legally drunk. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) between 1993 and 2003. "Alcohol misuse is the fourth leading cause of death in the United States, it accounts for 89,000 deaths annually and of those, 49,500 are acute causes – they are injuries or poisonings....," study author Ralph Hingson, of the U.S. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Terrorism kills, but the biggest killer remains the environment with close to 13 million annually. We feel the sting of manmade damage much worse than nature.

Congratulations!! And congratulations are indeed in order as all of us here this morning are survivors. Not only are we individually survivors, but we come from a long line of survivors. A very, very, very long line of survivors—a line of survivors that stretches way back to the beginning of microbial life on earth roughly 3.5 billion years ago. If any single one of our ancestors from that first reproducing cell all the way forward up to our parents had not survived to reproduce, you and I would not be here today. One could consider each of those ancestors a great grandparent to some power like "great to the millionth power" grandparent of us here today. Most of us would agree that being a survivor is usually the better of the two options. If you disagree...we need to talk.

I have always been interested in survival from a couple aspects. One is the evolutionary history of our planet. I could have happily been a paleo something or other trying to discover what happened and why, among the millions of creatures that evolved and went extinct. The second is that certain things Charley and I yearned to do in life come with some significant risk so I'm interested in how people survive when those risks go the wrong way. To not deny us certain activities because of risk or increase the danger to our lives by pursuing other activities with an unrealistic sense of the risks involved can lead to decisions we might regret. For example, on the short customs and immigration bridge from Zimbabwe to Zaire over the maelstrom pool exiting Victoria Falls, one has the opportunity to bungee jump, coming close to the torrent of waters at what seems like miles below before springing back up and down until you are hauled back up to the bridge. Nope, not for us. There was another fatality on that spot shortly after our visit. But sailing across the Gulf Stream in *Shiloh*, our Freedom 39, to spend winter in the Bahamas we found acceptable even though our adjacent slip holder in Sarnia, Ontario twenty months previously had foundered in that same place. Chuck and Betty Meur and a guest couple on their Freedom 40, *Charley's Crab*, were never heard from again.

We know that we today are better at surviving than were our human ancestors. Science tells us this because the average lifespan today greatly exceeds the average lifespan in the archaeological record. Further, in the studies of the most primitive peoples living isolated from the modern world, the premature death rate from conflict and other sources far exceeds the premature death rate in the modern world. Among the primitive tribes representative of our hunter/gatherer past, there are indeed fewer survivors of the threats they face among the risks

they take. Jared Diamond's recent book, "The World Until Yesterday," does a good job of summarizing that work. Diamond tells the story of western children having been brought up in primitive societies (anthropologists, missionaries, etc.) where the threats are lions, crocodiles, snakes, human attackers from adjacent tribes, and infection/infectious disease are the primary risks. Upon returning to the West as teenagers, a common terror to these youngsters comfortable with chasing a lion off a kill if they lived with the !Kung, is automobile traffic. And they are right in that perception. But American College students and groups of women voters in surveys, asked to rank life's dangers, both rated nuclear power, plane crashes, and terrorists as more dangerous than cars, despite nuclear power (even including the death tolls from the two atomic bombs), having actually killed only a minuscule fraction of the number of people that cars kill. Also rated high on the survey list is pesticides, closely behind guns, with surgery as relatively safe, whereas surgery is much more dangerous than pesticides. Actually cars, alcohol, and smoking top the list of life's dangers in the West each of which have killed far more people over the last four decades than terrorists, nuclear accidents, and plane crashes combined. Based upon premature deaths, American's in general greatly overrate the risks of nuclear reactor accidents, DNA-based technologies, new chemical technologies, and spray cans. Americans underrate the risks of alcohol, cars, and smoking, and (to a lesser extent) of surgery, home appliances, food spoilage, and step ladders. Nassim Taleb in *Black Swan* points out how anecdotes seem to dominate data for most people. If the guy next to you on the plane to New York tells you about a killing in Central Park, you likely won't go there. Diamond says we citizens of WEIRD societies (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) "don't always think as clearly as we should about the dangers we face. The data shows we WEIRD moderns

are especially prone to misestimate risks because we get most of our information second-hand from TV and other mass media that emphasize sensational but rare accidents and mass deaths. Whereas the primitive people estimate risks more accurately because they instead learn only from first-hand experiences of themselves, their relatives, and their neighbors. He recommends that we should be more realistic about dangers.

On a personal basis, some of us carry with us fears that increase our stress and inhibit our activities, both potentially to our detriment. Some, or possibly most, of those fears are not well founded.

Let's go through a little True/False exercise to explore the risk/survivor area a bit.

- If you fall into a near-freezing water, you have only three minutes to get out of the water. –False. If you fall into cold water, you have much more time to escape than you think.
- Right-handed people live longer than left-handed people. –True as supported by many studies.
- The safest seat in a plane is in the back. –False. Airplane accident statistics don't support that belief. However, proximity to an exit is a small plus.
- Actually, it doesn't make a significant difference where you sit in a plane because the survival rate on airplane accidents is only about 13 %. –False. The FAA says ninety-six percent of passengers survive airplane accidents.

- People who go to church once a week live an average of six years longer than those who don't. --True according to studies by Duke University, Bowling Green University, University of Texas, and others. And no, this last question was not an ad sponsored by our Board.

So let's talk a little about how we live our lives, worry about our risks, and survive when things do go awry. There are statisticians who quantify relative risk. There are learned people who spend much of their lives studying what differentiates Survivors of calamities from those who do not survive the same or a similar calamity. Some of those characteristics of survivors can be learned like good risk assessment.

I once worked with a guy who was normally pretty calm and laid back. However, if a bee or hornet zipped by he would go into a frenzy of hand-waving and yelling on the verge of panic and not because of any significant susceptibility to stings. He was not shy about other behavior that was much more risky, significant alcohol use including driving drunk as examples, but there was just something about bees and hornets that drove him crazy. He was great to be with if one of us stumbled onto a nest of yellow jackets as I could just freeze and assess the situation before easing away like most of us would, while he would flail around, yell, and run drawing all the bees attention to himself. I recall that I once ran a chainsaw into a yellow jacket nest while cutting up a stump. This guy wasn't around so I had to be the one who threw the chainsaw, flailed around, and ran as there was no quietly backing away once that screaming chainsaw hit that nest. No panic, it was just time to get out of Dodge and allow the yellow jackets to

concentrate on stinging the chainsaw to avenge the invasion. I got a few stings but nothing like what that chainsaw had to endure.

Bee stings are one thing, and serious for those proven to be highly susceptible, but life has many potential threats where preparedness and tenacity make all the difference in the world. Those threats can be disease, major trauma due to loss of a loved one, or physical threats such as the airplane accidents mentioned previously. Sometimes the cosmic coin toss accounts for everything, but clearly there is something else involved in what it takes to survive. There is no single theory that can encompass who lives and who dies, who suppresses panic and takes thoughtful action, who demonstrates resilience and who never recovers. Still survival isn't entirely out of our hands. In fact, we control much more of our destiny than we may have imagined. Above all, mind-set makes the difference. We can take care of ourselves and pay attention to our surroundings. We can make our own luck in the worst situations. You can pray, if it suits you. And we can persevere with willpower.

Knowledge of risks is important. Let's use the airplane accident example to illustrate one of the attributes researchers have identified among survivors. Suppose an uninformed person believed that each airplane accident resulted in killing nine out of ten passengers. And that person's seatmate knew that more than nine of ten passengers survive plane crashes. Which person would be most focused upon what to do to survive an impending plane crash, counting seats to the closest exit, donning their jacket for added protection, etc.? And which person

might allow the fatalistic perception of the situation to possibly overwhelm their thinking and freeze because of a fate they were convinced was coming?

Practically speaking, when we manage fear, our chances improve in almost every situation. But if our alarms go haywire, our odds plummet. For survival, then here's the bottom line. There's a mantra some of us have been taught that goes if you're scared out of your mind; Hug the Monster. Wrap your arms around fear, wrestle it under control, and turn it into a driving force in your plan of action. "Survival is not about bravery and heroics," award winning journalist Laurance Gonzales writes in his superb book *Deep Survival*. "Survivors aren't fearless. They use fear : They turn it into anger and focus." The good news is that we can learn to subdue the monster and extinguish some of the clanging bells.

Another aspect of survival is emotional survival. We all probably know people who just can't seem to handle life's bumps and bruises. When they're knocked down, they really struggle to get back up. We also probably know a few people who seem impervious, almost invincible. When they run into hard times, they rebound almost immediately. What accounts for the wide range of behavior? A person's psychology and life experience definitely play important roles.

Anecdotes hardly substitute for science but they are illustrative. Jeff Zucker took charge of NBC's Today program at age 26. At 31, more than 20 years ago, he was diagnosed with colon cancer that then spread to his lymph nodes. After a cry with his wife, he said to his doctors, "Okay, what do I have to do? Let's just do it. Because the sooner we get it over with, the

sooner I'm going to be better." Upon reflection in 2009, Zucker said, "Life is not a straight line up. Things are not always perfect. The measure of a person is how they deal with adversity." Zucker is around 50 and is now head of CNN.

In Yale studies of special forces soldiers, it was learned that carbs helped troops recover faster and get back to work after stressful periods. Their work showed that carbs made people smarter and faster on cognitive tests using parts of the brain that govern attention and concentration. The Yale researcher finds that's kind of cool. Carbs are cheap, they're easy to consume, and there aren't any significant side effects except if you overdo it and start gaining weight. Just don't overdo. Carbs also trigger the release of serotonin in the brain, which makes you feel better. The implication is that if we are heading into a risky time, heavy up the carbs a bit to help deal with risk to sharpen up a bit and accelerate your resilience, your bounce back.

As you might expect, when you get two resilience doctors together, they'll come up with a prescription, a Resilience Prescription. So what's in this ten-step prescription?

1. Practice optimism—that's a biggie, they say.
2. Identify a resilient role model.
3. Develop a moral compass and unbreakable beliefs.
4. Practice Altruism—helping others helps yourself feel better.
5. Develop acceptance and cognitive flexibility.
6. Face your fears and learn to control negative emotions.
7. Build active coping skills to handle problems.

8. Establish a supportive social network to help you.
9. Work to stay physically fit.
10. Laugh as much as you can.

The greatest surprise of researchers is the hidden capacity of most people to rebound from adversity. In his world of medicine—and certainly the media—it’s tempting to focus on evil and aberrant behavior. But if you look at all the resilience around you, you can’t help exclaiming: “Wow, being a human can be a beautiful thing.”

Most people exposed to the worst traumas do NOT experience psychiatric disorders or posttraumatic stress syndrome. They turn out fine. In fact experts argue that posttraumatic growth is significantly more prevalent than posttraumatic stress. That’s not news. Nietzsche wrote, “What does not kill me makes me stronger.” Literature and religion virtually teem with references to growth from adversity.

A significant number of survivors report their relationships are strengthened by their ordeals. They experience greater compassion and sympathy. They feel simultaneously more vulnerable in the world—and stronger. Their philosophies of life improve with a shift in priorities as they recognize the precariousness of themselves and of others and the limits of their time on earth.

There are a number of enlightening POW studies one of which found considerably more than the majority of the POW’s reported “favorable” psychological changes after captivity, including

a deeper understanding of themselves and others and a clearer sense of life's priorities. When a well-known researcher was asked what else we have learned from these studies, he states, "Human beings aren't as vulnerable as we think...most people are a lot more resilient than they realize. A lot of people just don't have enough faith in what they're able to do."

There is a Survivor Personality just as some people are born musicians or artists, some people have a natural talent handling risky situations and events. The rest of us have to work consciously to develop our abilities. The Survivor Profile is based upon experience of successful survivors around the world. It identifies and measures tools that have enabled ordinary people to overcome extraordinary adversity. Experts agree that planning and preparation are the twin pillars of survival. If you bring a compass, map, or GPS when you go hiking, you've got a potential survival edge over someone who packs only a picnic. The same applies to your inner resources. If we band together tethering ourselves to family, friends, and fellow survivors, we can bolster our chances of overcoming. Generosity and selflessness are among the most surprising survival tools. Those who study the survivors meet men and women committed to helping others cope with misfortune. Without question, empathy, purpose, and a calling greater than oneself are among the most powerful life preservers of all.

So my closing words are a recommendation that we think through how to survive risks to which we are exposed and that we not shy away from enhancing our lives by taking risks that are worth the gain. And have confidence in our resilience, in our tomorrows.

For you hockey fans—there are hockey fans in the Northern Neck, aren't there?—you hockey fans will know the name Wayne Gretsky, reported to be the greatest hockey player ever. Gretsky once was asked why he takes so many seemingly high risk shots on goal. He answered, "take no shots, score no goals." You may have run across that quote in discussions of living a full and productive life. "Take no risks, score no goals."