

A sampling of close calls:

Foolishly rushing towards the final appointment (1995-2010)



Of a footnote's reckless conception:

At about the same time the cop would have rung the doorbell, I was in the middle of the stairs, crouching before my 3-year-old.

"So how's my favourite guy in the whole wide world?"

Just 15 minutes earlier I was stopped at the red light over intersection of Parker and Willington. The glass repair van ahead was indicating for a right turn. At that same instant, I was thinking about a footnote I would need to add to chapter #3 of my MA thesis: a further reference on 'automaticity' and 'self-monitoring' in learning.

Automatically assuming that light had changed when the glass repair van jerked into a right turn, I tramped the gas pedal. Then barely in time to slam the brake, I saw the red light. By a fraction of a second, I missed barreling into the midst of whizzing cross-traffic.

"Can we play wrestlers, daddy?" said my little M.H., holding up his models of Hulk Hogan and the Iranian Beast.

"Give me a few minutes, honey," I kissed my little boy's head.

Yes, in a few more minutes the doorbell would be ringing. It would most likely be my 10-year old who would answer and then call her mother to the bottom of the stairs. My 2 girls would probably huddle on the stairs before the cop at the door would ask my wife to send them to their room. He might then come up the stairs and ask T. to sit down before delivering the news. How would she react? If she broke into a wail, those sounds would be seared forever into the memories of my 2 girls.

'You be the bad guy, OK, da?' said little M.H., thrusting forward the shaven-headed figure in red tights. Had I disappeared forever from his world today— my son would probably have no memory of me whatsoever.

"Daddy, we're doing '*Oliver*' at school!" Chirped my 10-year-old coming from the living room. She bounced down the stairs to greet me.

"That's exciting, honey," I said, kissing her cheek.

"I'm trying out for Nancy and Oliver," she beamed, "The teacher said Oliver doesn't have to be a boy."

Yes, my sweet eldest would probably have been the one to open the door to a grim-faced Mountie...

"Careful, honey, you could knock me right over backwards!"

Meanwhile, my 3-year old was tugging at my neck.

"Can I have gum, daddy!" he shoved a little hand into my bookbag.

"Hold on!" Digging in my bag, I thought again of the footnote on automaticity and self-monitoring. Ironically, it had been the very absence of self-monitoring by which a would-be writer of a footnote nearly became a statistic.

"Just be patient, guys." I pressed out chicklets of Excel for both M.H. and his big sister then watched as they began to chew. Lest I dare *ever* be unmindful that there are 4 other lives in my hand at the wheel!

1995, October

fwt

Caught in the headlamps:

Driving back at 10:15 PM through the Lougheed Avenue traffic, I shuddered in the whoosh of the ongoing headlights. If a tire should burst— not a chance to avoid a head on collision!

Along with that grim apprehension, I was jolted by an image of a smashed-up body in a crushed car, pushing away the arm of a would-be rescuer. What could be more horrific than the spectacle of a brain-dead body, flailing? Little consolation that the twitching body itself would be beyond apprehension of fear or pain. More horrifying is imagining some gawker from a car window glimpsing a mashed-up body whose arm is flapping like the wing of a slaughtered chicken...

I squeezed my leather glove tighter on the wheel. How very odd to worry that one's death could be *embarrassing*!

1999, September

fwt

In the reminder of borrowed time:

Driving down Lougheed at 10:30 PM, I turned off the CBC news after the sports item of the fiery death in California of one Greg Moore, a Canadian racing car driver, at the age of only 24. Poor kid! At least he died with a legacy...

In a rheumy blink, I glimpsed another 24-year old of nearly a quarter century ago: a shy young man holed up in a warren above Columbia St., East Vancouver. What if one of his regular outings to 2nd hand bookstores, his bike had been struck from behind? (A danger several times narrowly averted). What would have been *his* legacy? Years before he was to become a teacher, a father, diarist— he had virtually no ‘identity’ at all...

It that sobering awareness, there seared to mind a flashback of receiving news of the tragedy of 3 high school acquaintances who never even made it to 24:

One afternoon in July '72, I was comfortably resting in a university dorm room after morning classes, turning to the back page of the ‘*Telegraph Journal*’. Seeing lined up photos of 3 very familiar faces, for an instant I thought they must have won some scholarship or sports award. Then came the shock of the headline (‘*Victims Identified and Mourned*’) followed by the chilling details. The weekend before, when returning to the city from a summer outing, their Volkswagen was slammed into a barrier by the driver of a stolen car. All three— none older than 21— were killed on impact.

I stared at the photos, remembering the voices of each of the victims. At the same time, I thought of the frightening episode of the previous weekend in which hitch-hiking to my former village, I had been picked up by 2 drunken soldiers. As we hurtled along a twisting road, I had braced white-knuckled in the back seat. Had I just been shit-lucky in nearly the same hour that my 3 acquaintances had not? That reflection left a haunting sense of duty: ‘*If I should fail to appreciate the gift of every day— then I dishonour those whose borrowed time I live upon*’...

In a shudder, I signaled for the right lane. So how much of the 30 years since has been honorably spent? How much of it squandered?

I glanced into the dark rearview mirror and then twisted to check over the right shoulder. Yes, after all these years, I still have to remind myself to check the blind spots...

1999, November

Chastened yet again:

Driving into work this afternoon along the rain soaked Lougheed Highway, I ploughed along the middle lane, trying to edge ahead of the semi-trailer in the right lane so that I could pull in ahead of him.

That was a half-second before the van ahead of me braked.

Suddenly, I was skidding towards the back of the van while veering into the left lane where a semi-trailer was rolling up from behind. Heart ballooning into throat, I eased off the brake and whooshed back into middle lane, holding just enough traction to keep sliding forward ahead of another semi-trailer moving up in the rear-view mirror. 2 chest thumps later, full traction was restored in which I slowed down, stunned by the closest call in years...

Shaking, I drove the rest of the way to work imagining scenarios by a whisker averted:

It would have been a student coming to the office to ask the assistant why I was late. She would have checked the resource room and then walked over to see the darkened door of my shared office. Then she would have phoned my home number which would have rung unanswered. She would then have asked the Assistant Dept. Head whether it was too late to call a sub...

Meanwhile, the RCMP would have rung the buzzer of my apartment (Hopefully, both T.E. and M.H. are at their mother's place for dinner tonight!)

At the same time, the Assistant Dept. Head would have been calling around—possibly even to the hospitals. If she hadn't received a police report before leaving for the night, by tomorrow morning, someone in the school would have informed the department about the news report of the fatal accident on Highway One. The news would have then moved quickly through the college.

By tomorrow afternoon, an email would have been sent out by the College President: *'We are deeply saddened to learn of the sudden death of our colleague...'* After the shock and the *'there but for the grace'* moments of silence, some thoughts would undoubtedly have turned to the seniority list...

Yet no scenario is uglier to imagine than the grim news being first received by one of the kids. If either T.E. or M.H. had decided to do their homework in my apartment tonight then they would have answered when the cop rang the buzzer. I bit tongue and shook head. No, they need me—and for far more than my paycheck.

Swallowing hard, I flexed fingers on the wheel and through the final 10 minutes to the college—drove appropriately chastened.

2003, October

Of a day's morbid tone:

In driving home tonight in the silence of the switched off radio, I recalled the anecdote of missionary David Livingston, recounted in Alan Morehead's '*The White Nile*', recently added to the night table. In describing his mauling by a lion, Livingston described '*an instant of confusion followed by a drowsy calmness...*' He ascribed the strange calmness on the brink of death as the '*mercy of the almighty*', which he assumed was extended to all living creatures in the throes of dying...

Yet then I remembered the chickens at the back of my house in Hadejia, Nigeria, coming under the knife of Yanousi, my domestic helper. The spurting forth of their life blood was usually proceeded by a mad fluttering panic. No '*mercy of the almighty*' there!

In the next few blinks, I imagined the sensation of annihilation bereft of that '*drowsy calmness*':

Perhaps one would feel a tremendous squeezing pressure from chest to fingertips to eyeballs. Maybe the suffocating squeeze would be followed by a sudden release—a sense of *slipping through*... The subjective experience of biological cessation could be something of a recapitulation of cosmic entropy: like the cosmic squeeze on a burnt-out red dwarf simultaneous with its collapse...

That thought triggered an analogy of the Islamic martyr/terrorist shaving off all body hair in preparation for exploding a suicide vest. Apparently, the belief is a body can more easily pop out of the world if rendered as hairless as the babe squeezed into it...

I shivered. Why such a morbid train of thought?

In passing the Gaglardi Way exit, I then remembered the poignant spectacle witnessed on the drive in: It was of an injured crow trapped in the middle of the westbound lanes. Flapping wings, the doomed crow hopped desperately attempting to avoid the zooming traffic.

Like a lesser god without the power to intervene, I helplessly witnessed a fellow creature's heroic—yet hopeless—struggle. So that was the heart-sickening image that set the tone for the rest of the day...

2004, June

In passing a roadside memorial:

Glimpsed in passing at the bottom of the green traffic light standard at the corner of Westwood and Crabbe tonight was a drenched bouquet. It immediately stuck that the fresh memorial must be for the poor pedestrian who died at that spot, just 3 blocks south of Inlet Drive, 2 days ago. As reported yesterday on the CBC news, the victim was walking home from work when she was mowed down from behind by a turning semi-trailer. She was a 53-year old mother whose least expectation, surely, was to step off a curb into nothingness.

Along with the sadness of the death of a stranger from my neighbourhood exactly my age (a person possibly walked past more than once in these same streets) there was the shock of fragility. Lest it be forgotten that at any moment oblivion can burst forth— from within or from without —with suffocating swiftness.

As long as work remains undone and obligations unfulfilled— it is utterly fitting that every wasted hour should haunt!

2004, November

fwt

Diminishing returns:

Tonight, I dangerously pushed the clock in the drive home. After checking the time (10:03 PM) before pulling out of the college parking lot, I beat the light at Clark Drive and entered the crest of the wave of the night traffic heading east from downtown. The tight and aggressive traffic seemed to intensify all the way down the freeway and up Lougheed Ave. from where I made it to the Westwood St. Coquitlam turnoff at 10:28 PM.

Then before the train tracks I saw a line up and a couple of cars turning around. Was the near record commuting time to be ruined by a train delay? Pushing along behind a few other equally impatient drivers, I passed a parked car with people standing behind it in the ditch. A fresh accident? Blocking the left lane was a brown compact Toyota Tercel and a red minivan. In turning out around, I saw that the front end of the Tercel was blunted and the driver's side of the minivan bashed in. On the pavement in front of the van was a pool of blood, dark and glistening. The emergency vehicles had yet to arrive.

Momentarily sobered, the drivers fore and aft slowed down for the next 3 blocks. Then seconds later in the whisking away of a short-term memory, the traffic speeded up again.

5 minutes later, I eased up under my canopy on Inlet Drive and switched off the engine with a sharply exhaled breath. Before touching the door handle, I stared for a few moments at my front door.

In that moment, I thought of WWII pilots climbing out of their cockpits upon their return from a bombing raid. Perhaps along with their relief was a stoic understanding that with each successive mission, the odds of their returning safely were further diminished...

2005, April

Two near misses within 30 minutes:

Having been delayed by last-minute trouble shooting and barely a minute into the drive home, I rushed to beat the amber light at 1st Ave. In a gulp, I whizzed past the ship-sized motorhome making a sloppy-wide lane turn barely a second before I would have been squeezed into a lamp standard.

A half hour later that close call was all but forgotten. Upon reaching Port Moody and eager for the warmth of home and hearth—I cursed the slow red light before the empty Moody St. overpass. Just as I was poised to dart forward on the yellow, a semi-trailer came out of the dark into the intersection. It barreled across the overpass at least a second after my light turned green. Mercifully, for that critical second, the foot on the pedal had been restrained!

Shuddering in the last half minute up Murray St. to Klahanie Drive, it occurred that I was close enough to home for my dear partner, C. to have heard the crash, if not the sirens that followed. In the midst of setting the table might she have felt on her neck a ghostly fluttering of dark wings?

2010, December

Postscript:

'A rich and mighty Persian once walked in his garden with one of his servants. The servant cried that he had just encountered Death, who had threatened him. He begged his master to give him his fastest horse so that he could make haste and flee to Teheran, which he could reach that same evening. The master consented and the servant galloped off on the horse. On returning to his house the master himself met Death, and questioned him, "Why did you terrify and threaten my servant?" "I did not threaten him; I only showed surprise in still finding him here when I planned to meet him tonight in Teheran."

-Old Persian fable

