Terror on the High Seas

In my post-diagnosis, post-chemo world, irrational anxiety has become my near-constant companion.

February 27, 2020 By Jeff Neurman

Last week, I, along with my wife and children and all of my in-laws, set sail for a multi-day voyage aboard a cruise ship. I realize that many, in reading that sentence juxtaposed with the title of this piece, would naturally assume that the terror I experienced was that resulting from several days in extremely close quarters with no available avenue of escape with family members. And to be sure, I think there are few things that produce more unhappiness than spending extended periods with one's own family. In fact, I took a great deal of rather morbid pleasure in seeing that other families were as busily engaged in yelling at one another as my own has often been known to do.

Yet, while there is a certain element of terror inherent in most any family get-together, my impetus for this writing has noting to do with those to whom I am related — be it by blood or marriage. Instead, the source of my panic on this trip took the form of a 12-passenger speedboat.

I should have known from the outset that there was going to be trouble. While attempting to board this vessel, if one can call this minuscule motorized dinghy a vessel, we had to descend backwards down a wooden ladder to, hopefully, footing on the rocking boat. In addition to the exhaustive list of anxiety-producing activities and objects in my life, ladders — and heights more broadly — must be included thereon. And although I was not particularly afraid of falling off the ladder to the tiny tub below, I was concerned — as only I can be — about lodging a splinter into my mandatorily shoeless feet on this far-from sanded vertical conveyance. As one who grew up in the heart of Appalachia, where being shoeless was a stereotype applied against us from the sophisticates in neighboring states — like Ohio and Kentucky — I have always been loath to go anywhere barefoot. As a result, my soles are quite tender and rather sensitive. In a manner of speaking, the bottom of my feet are almost royalty-like in that way. Clearly the only part of me that could be so generously described.

Once aboard this 12-seat hyper-powered raft — painted in taxi cab yellow, a color that does nary a thing for anyone from New York to bestow any sense of confidence within them — the "captain" informed us that we would have "a great time: zigging and zagging, skipping over waves and even engaging in 359-degree turns." (Why we could not go the extra degree was not clear to me, but I figured that was one fewer degree over which to fret.) In fact, "only during the near-360 turns would we need to hold on."

Unfortunately for me, this wisdom was imparted to us after we had already left the dock — and its

rough-hewn ladder — far behind. At this moment, as I heard the skipper's words, I was struck by one of the most overpowering and profound panic attacks that I have ever encountered. To make matters exponentially worse, I was accompanied on the Titanic that day by not only one of my sisters-in-law and her 8-year-old daughter, but my own seven-year-old son, Andrew. And despite the mandatory sporting of life-vests, there were no seatbelts or other restraints aboard the S.S. Minnow to be found anywhere. As I looked down at my own white-as-Casper knuckles clutched around the hollow metal railing, I worried how I could let go with one hand and still manage to keep a hold of my dearest Andrew. At this moment, I was convinced that I had to abort the mission, but clearly there was no way to safely escape. We were seated in the last row and the pilot, which is probably the most apt term given the speed and gravity-defying maneuvers in which this craft engaged, was far too distant for me to reach much less be heard over the Boeing 737 MAX repurposed engines. I just prayed that we would all survive the experience with only permanent disfigurement and the loss of no more than two limbs per individual.

If all of this sounds like much ado about nothing, I have a simple response for you: You are 100% correct. But, you see, that is the point. While I have never been fearless, or even much of a risk-taker (I am, after all, a corporate lawyer by training), my anxiety about matters of this sort has never been anywhere near so acute. It is, rather, in my post-diagnosis, post-chemo world that irrational anxiety has become my near-constant companion. And the problem with irrational anxiety is that there is nothing — short of self-medicating (and this was a dry excursion) — that can be done to counteract it. Because it is, by definition, not rational, the application of sane thought to the experience is completely ineffectual. Even if I were somehow able to manage to have logical mental processes at these moments, the sheer overwhelming nature of panic makes even the most sensible and factually-grounded lines of reasoning wholly impotent. I become stuck in a hopeless void of fear and despair that depends entirely on external factors — such as no more of those damn zigs or zags — to allow for a reclamation of my weakened mind.

Why this should all be the case is not clear to me. I do know, however, that many others who regrettably are similarly-situated have the same encounters with these types of irrational panics. Perhaps the unwelcome realization that cancer brings of one's own mortality makes anything that could even theoretically pose an existential threat that much more troubling. I am not sure, but I have also noticed that the last few times I have been on an airplane that has encountered meaningful turbulence — the type that causes one to risk the flight attendants' ire when making a run for the lavatory — I have similarly become highly upset and mentally disenfranchised.

Of course, I ultimately did survive. (This posting is not from my posthumous collection, but some day those will be likely forthcoming so keep an eye out for them.) And Andrew and my niece had a blast: They were going hands-free and laughing with such joy that it made the entire cripplingly terrifying experience worth it. Almost.

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