

Trestle

Each time I take a train to the city, I'm reminded of what a terrible father I was as a young man. Certainly not with intent, of course, my irresponsibility was most often due to ignorance. At the train station, the engine racing toward me down the platform brings back a particular memory and the thought that danger is only inches away. Like parenting, I think, the best approach to danger is to just be still and not move. For those of us who ordinarily think that a dilemma must be met by running up to it and pushing back with equal force, a five hundred ton train moving at seventy miles per hour should persuade us to reconsider.

When my son was eight years old, it occurred to me these close years between father and son were limited, so I tried hard to find things for us to do together. On a Sunday afternoon in the early fall the two of us headed out for a hike to the railroad tracks that ran down the west side of the Hudson River from Albany to New York City. Curving this way and that on its way south, the rail line finally rolled out on a straightaway for a good two or three miles as it came down the valley. Then, not far from our house, it burst out over a deep gorge and waterfall, the iron rails shooting across an old wooden trestle.

Carefully walking out half way across the rickety bridge to a point over the falls, our imaginations told us we were daring explorers. If a train came along we might just stand still and enjoy its passing. That might not be very safe, of course, but I'd certainly hear it coming and have time to get back to the bank where one end of the span was anchored. I was wrong. As we peered down at the falls through the spaces between the track ties, we couldn't hear anything over the noise of the water. I realized my error too late as I glanced up and saw the light on the engine moving rapidly toward us.

The trestle was built only wide enough for a train, and then a tiny bit more in case someone was dumb enough to get caught out there when a mountain of steel came beating down the tracks. And because the builders didn't have casual walkers in mind, there were no railings. We stood on an emergency walkway, two parallel boards perhaps each ten inches wide, laid out in a string across the ties and parallel to the tracks.

We quickly started back to the beginning of the trestle where we could step out of the way of the oncoming freight. I held tightly on to Dave's shirt collar to ensure he didn't bolt ahead of me, slip off the narrow path of boards and tumble over the edge of the trestle to the falls below. We weren't going to make it. Better to wait it out here, I quickly concluded.

The two locomotives pulling perhaps a hundred cars now charged on to the trestle and the structure began to shake. That settled it. I sat us down and wrapped Dave in my arms and legs as if I was behind him on a toboggan. Squeezed in between the edge of the trestle a few feet away and the rails that would carry the train past us, we

sat watching the behemoth fly up to devour us.

When something that large is about to miss you by inches, it appears to be coming right over the top of you. I grabbed on to the edges of the boards underneath us and held on for dear life, steeling myself against the urge to jump up in a heedless panic, only to slip over the edge and fall end over end down into the water.

“We’re perfectly safe, Dave,” I shouted .
“Just keep your head and your hands down.”

And for good measure, “Close your eyes!”
But I left mine open till the very end.

The blast of air as the train passed over us, for that’s what it seemed to do, pressed the cheeks up into our eyes and felt strong enough to blow us off the trestle. It might indeed have done so if we had remained standing. The roar was terrifically loud, like a thunder clap that went on and on. Dorothy back in Kansas would have recognized all the earmarks of being swept up in a tornado. But we held on to the planks below us and with my legs I held on to this most precious bundle, my son, for as long as it took. And it seemed to take forever.

I suppose I learned something that day. So much for always feeling in charge, for example. In fact, I look back on the incident as holding signs of everything that would play out in my career as a father. No matter if future calamity were brought on by stupidity or fate, I could not save my son from forces so overpowering that they were beyond our control. I was often able to do nothing but figuratively keep my arms around him in the coming years when I stood with him as he grew to be a man. He would sometimes overrate his own

capabilities as I had, but he would own his own disappointments and grief. I would have nothing to arm him with but hope, which was all he ever needed. He would face deadly disease and later the loss of the woman he loved, his own precious bundle gone off to a heaven he didn’t believe in. Through his life, he would walk out on his own train trestles and he would somehow survive. I may have sometimes been clueless as a father, but I loved him through it all. And that would be enough.

And then it was over. The train was gone. Dave moved, but I held him down a few seconds before we sat up.

“We’re going to stay here a minute so we can recover,” I said, “before we get up and walk down the planks.”

“Hey, that was neat!” he said, turning his head around and beaming up at me.

“We’re going to stay here a minute,” I repeated, “so *Dad* can recover before he gets up and staggers down the planks.”

In a few minutes we walked off the trestle.

“Wait’ll Mom hears about this!” he said gleefully.

I could hardly wait.

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