

Seasonal Acrophobia: A "Case Study"

By Steve Sobel

It was a bluebird day as skiers are wont to say, not a pesky cloud in the azure sky. With temperatures in the mid-twenties and a light breeze out of the southeast, nature was bestowing kindness and comfort that day.

I waited in the chairlift line with my eight-year-old son, David. He was excited about our plan to try our luck on Devil's Playground, steeper and peppered with more moguls than any trail he had conquered up until that day. I, too, eagerly anticipated the thrill of racing down the mountain.

We shuffled along in the line, which was surprisingly short. As the parents and their two young daughters in front of us boarded the quad chairlift, we were already gliding into place for the next chair. As the line was short, no strangers would be riding up with us. I knew the ride up would be harrowing due to my fear of heights, but I'd been through that before and the reward of a thrilling descent would more than compensate for that tribulation.

As the chair scooped us up and carried us up to the first lift pole, I felt confident, I reminded myself that thousands of adults and children have uneventful chairlift rides every day. With the safety bar down, there was really no way to fall out. Nevertheless, what if I had a panic attack leading to a myocardial infarct and was stuck on the lift. The delay until getting medical help would be fatal. Another ridiculous preoccupation, I tried to reassure myself. Soon the crescendo of heart palpitations slammed into my chest as panic proclaimed victory over my tepid reasoning. Waves of heat radiated from my heart and dizziness raised the specter of fainting. Slipping through the bars and off the chairlift would of course inevitably follow. If only my feet were planted on solid ground, I'd be laughing at that preposterous thought. Like many acrophobics, I not only worried about falling, but even worse, worried I might crack up and impulsively jump from a great height. The uncontrolled panic made loss of rationality seem all too likely. As we approached the mid-station, the mere option of getting off was enough to dissipate the sense of doom. I was once again sure this would pass just as had all my previous chairlift rides.

The family ahead of us had their bar raised as they prepared to unload at the midstation. Suddenly, the parents realized one of their daughters, who looked to be no more than six years old, had remained on the lift. The mother screamed desperately: "Stop the lift!", but the lift kept moving. The attendant came out of the booth and explained vacuously that there was nothing to be done. The girl would have to continue on to the top where another attendant would help her off. Immediately following the mid-station, the lift went over a deep gully leaving the lift riders at least five stories high for a seeming eternity. Meanwhile, the girl was lying on her back on the chair. The safety bar was left in the raised position. She screamed for her life. I yelled to her to just sit back and not to move. The girl was initially petrified, but soon, despite my pleas to remain still, she attempted to sit up and reach for the safety bar. At that moment she slipped off the lift and fell like pigeon shot from the sky. My son witnessing this, shouted to me: "Dad aren't you going to jump off and help her?" I sat speechless. The lift attendant stopped the lift in a futile attempt to reverse the cruel march of time. A chaotic cacophony of wailing and screaming ensued below as the girl's family along with everyone else rushed to the scene of the accident. After another eternity, the lift began moving again. My son queried me: "Why didn't you jump down and help her?" I tried to explain that I would not have survived a jump from that height and such a kamikaze action would have further burdened the ski patrol. Clearly, he did not buy these seemingly wimpy rationalizations.

With the wind knocked out of our sails, we returned home following a blasé run during which we were focused entirely on the goal of getting to the parking lot as quickly as possible. We were oblivious to our surroundings during our descent, but once we reached the base lodge, the refrain whispered with horror: "Did you hear about the little girl who fell off the lift?", flowed towards us like salt water on a wound. Upon our arrival home, David announced to my wife: "A girl fell off the chairlift and Dad didn't do anything to help!" We spent that evening and the days that followed trying to make some sense of the tragedy with our son. The processing and discussions exerted a rather paradoxical effect on me. I became increasingly convinced of the merit of my son's accusation. I told myself I had failed a moral test just as had Jean Baptiste Clamence in Camus' novel, "The Fall". Rationally, I knew I could have done nothing, but the event led to a cascade of memories of moral weakness. The cumulative effect had all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. I began to wonder how I could look myself in the mirror. My son's innocent glances were transformed in my mind into damning judgments.

By the next weekend, I had worked myself into such a miserable state that desperate measures began to adorn themselves with cloaks of reasonableness. I left early that Saturday morning, hoping to arrive at the ski resort before the crowds. I knew what I had to do. By jumping off the chair at its highest point, I would prove to David and more importantly to myself, that cowardice was not my master, that I had the courage to face my worst fears and do the right thing. Distorted, pathological reasoning perhaps, but its momentary coherence offered a chance to redeem my honor. I was alone in line and would have the chair to myself. As I approached the mid-station, I had a fleeting recognition of the irony that I'd finally overcome my irrational fear of jumping from a height by deliberately making that choice. I lifted the safety bar. An eerie sense of calm enveloped me. As the chair passed over the mid-station ramp, however, the familiar wave of hot fear spread through my body. I was sweating, my heart was pounding and I knew I had only moments to make my fateful move. But I sat paralyzed in fear. I could not move, much less jump. The lift continued on relentlessly. The panic gradually subsided and I put down my safety bar in response to the attendant's insistent shouts. I had to smile to myself as I realized I could not force myself to jump even though I had set out with that express purpose in mind. Yet all these years I'd been haunted by the fear I'd impulsively take that action.

One week later, my case of temporary insanity had lifted. Once again I found myself in line with David, who had apparently managed to cram the horrific memories of our last outing into the dark recesses of his unconscious. I thought to myself with great relief that I now knew I could never jump from a height so the cure of my acrophobia must be the silver lining of the past few weeks of black clouds and foggy thinking. I almost eagerly awaited the chair. Perhaps, the chairlift ride would become the interlude of boredom or a chance to relax that it was for normal people. An opportunity to chat with one's fellow sojourners on the lift. Once seated, I tried to focus on the enjoyable aspects of a day of skiing with my son. We spoke about his new ability to carve his skis around moguls without reverting to a snowplow. Several minutes later, the familiar crescendo of heart beats and waves of heat had returned with a vengeance. Turning to me, David asked: "Dad why is your face so red and sweaty?" I decided to explain a bit about my fear of heights, partly to distract myself from the physical sensations that were attacking me. David's face lit as he exclaimed: "Wow, so you're really brave to go on this lift even though you're scared!" As this revelation seeped through the shroud of panic, I thought to myself, indeed, I was a sort of hero to persist in my Sisyphean endeavor while carrying my internalized burden, in defiance of Death itself. I wondered if, for Sisyphus too, each trip up the mountain might really have been a radically changed experience. Just then my awareness shifted abruptly to our height above the slopes. Fear seized me with its cold sharp talons. Nevertheless, I figured I had at least a 50/50 chance of surviving to the top and then losing myself in the thrill of the gliding down the mountain with my son. I felt my lips part in an almost imperceptible smile.

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