

## Trestle

Each time I took a train to the city, I was reminded of what a terrible father I had been as a young man. Certainly not with intent, of course. My irresponsibility was due to ignorance. Waiting on the platform for the train, the engine racing toward me down the tracks always evoked a particular memory and the thought that danger in most of our lives was never more than inches away.

Whether waiting for a train or waiting for our children to grow up, sometimes the best protection from harm was to just be still and not move. For those who thought that a dilemma should be met by running up to it and pushing back with equal force, a five hundred ton train moving at seventy miles per hour would persuade anyone to reconsider.

When my son was eight years old, it occurred to me these close years between father and son were limited, so I looked to find activities for us to do together. On one 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 that had probably been built during World War I.

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 would 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 thundering water. I realized my error too late. I glanced up and saw the light on the engine moving rapidly toward us from about a half mile up the line.

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 off the trestle where we could step out of the way of the oncoming freight. I held on tightly 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. The train closed on us rapidly. We weren't going to make it. Better to wait it out here, I quickly concluded.

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 sat 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 on her farm in Kansas

would have recognized all the earmarks of being swept up in a tornado. We held on to the planks beneath 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 may have imagined it, but I thought I saw something coming toward us sticking out of the side of the train.

I flopped down on my back and forced his head down on my chest. He resisted my effort and started back up. "Oh, God," I thought, "don't bolt." He didn't. He lay back.

I had been staring over at the side of the trestle, making sure we didn't somehow slip over that way. But now lying on our backs, I no longer could gauge how close we might be to the edge. Looking upward at the sky, all I could see were big puffy white clouds painted on a bright blue canopy. A loving God lived up there, I began to fervently hope, because now it was all up to him. Other than gazing at his front door, I could do nothing but wait this out.

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

"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."

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 what he needed most from me. 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 honestly, as I told my wife later, over and over, we were indeed safe. We were not **THAT** close to the edge of the trestle and the train derailing on top of us had no more possibility of happening than it might the next time I waited for a passing train while I sat in my car at the crossing. Still it was a dumb stunt on my part and I can't really object when my son today introduces me as "my father, the man who tried to kill me ... several times."

On that afternoon I sat up and looked around at the beautifully colored leaves of fall, and then down at the water raging beneath the trestle. I no longer felt like a great explorer, but it was good to be alive. In a few minutes we walked off the trestle, my legs more than a little wobbly.

"Wait'll Mom hears about this!" Dave said gleefully.

I could hardly wait.

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