

Living Vicariously

[This is a letter I sent to my sister Connie and brother-in-law Jere on October 22, 1991 after they informed me that they had just celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary by sky-diving together. –S.H.]

Dear Connie & Jere (“Rip Cord” & “Free Fall”),

Got your letter and the accompanying newspaper article about your sky-diving experience on your 25th wedding anniversary. Quite the creative way to celebrate! But I must confess that it affected me strangely... Kind of gave me a light-headed, sinking feeling, if you know what I mean.

In fact, my eyes clouded over, and I tried to wing it to my easy chair. But my feet were like lead, and it seemed that I just did not have the will power to take that first big step across the room. For reasons I don't quite understand, I felt like I was about to make a wild and crazy leap into the great Unknown. Then fate intervened; I lost my balance and, tripping over the rug, I became airborne. “So this is all there is to it!”, I thought with an airy satisfaction.

For a brief moment I had an “out of body experience”. (Some might prefer to call it an “out of mind” experience...) I fancied myself high in the sky, up there with the moon, and far below me the carpet appeared to be the whole world presenting itself for my inspection. So it seemed at first that things were going smoothly, and a kind of elation even overtook me. But it was not to last.

I glanced down at my pedal extremities and noticed with horror that one of my shoe laces was broken, and the other was loose and twisted in the most ugly and menacing manner. I tried vainly to reach and tie the loose one, but with the rushing wind and my beer belly it was just no used. And then the shock of realization hit me—*I had no backup laces on me!* Real panic began to set in as I continued to plummet head over heels, pulled by the entire gravitational force of the planet Earth!

As I tumbled and the air whooshed by my ears, my whole life flashed before me in an instant. It seemed a great pity to go in such a mundane way; there was so much life left in me, and so much that remained to be done. (I have not yet visited the antipodes. I have not yet even mastered the zither!) I shed some bitter tears, I can tell you!

Then in that moment of truth, a powerful feeling of serenity suddenly overcame me, Con, just like your experience I imagine, when the certain knowledge of inevitable and imminent death calmed me and brought me resignation if not courage. I thought of my patron saint (the noted philosopher, Alfred E. Newman), from whom I have learned much, and was deeply comforted by turning his inspiring motto over and over in my mind: “What, me worry?!”

But now the end was near; nay, it was nigh. The sofa began to rush up toward me with ever increasing speed. Obviously there would be no escaping it, try though I might.

And then came the ferocious, teeth-rattling, bone-jarring impact. My entire body was crushed against the sofa, compacted tremendously until I looked for an instant like my formerly svelte self. The air rushed out of my lungs in a hideous roar, which must have caused shivers to run up and down the tails and spines of the passing curs on the street. The dust rushed out of the squashed sofa, and formed sort of a mini mushroom cloud, partly, perhaps, made up of molding real mushrooms from the dingy old sofa's musty interior. But miraculously, *I had survived!*

As I began to recover my wits (becoming first a half-wit, and then a three-quarters-wit), I found that I was basically safe and sound. I still had two arms, two legs, two eyes, two ears, two kidneys, and two of all the other things that you are supposed to have two of. And most reassuringly, my noggin was *not* split in two!

And yet, I am of two minds about this whole incident... How had it all happened? Was it fore-ordained, from the beginning of time? Or was it merely the result of a random quantum fluctuation in some tiny dust mote on the bottom of my shoe?

And how had I survived? How had I managed to escape unscathed?? Heaven only knows! True there were some inconsequential after-effects; for days afterwards that old tune kept going around and around in my head, "I've Got a Feeling I'm Falling". And I have been unable as yet to pry my little finger out of my ear.

But as time passed, somehow the whole gruesome incident seemed to become less frightening. My ordeal seems in retrospect like a piece of cake! I may even consider trying it again sometime, if ever the occasion presents itself...

* * *

I recounted the above episode to a friend of mine ("Ziggy") who has had many years of training in psychiatry and brain surgery (though he now works as a taxi driver and a part-time mixologist at a local night spot). He was not at all surprised by it.

"Din't I already tell you, mein freund, dat you have dis tendency zince childhood to live vicariously?" he asked.

"Well, yes you did tell me that, Ziggy," I replied, using my free hand to hoist my martini for another honk. "But somehow your diagnosis always seemed to apply more to others than to me."

"Vell, you see now! Dat is exactly vut I am trying to explain to you! You are constantly confusing your own experiences vit vut happens to ozer people."

"Hmmm. I see what you mean. Of course, there is a positive side to it," I said.

“Oh, yah? Vell, vut is dat?”

“If you avoid the really dangerous activities of life, and only participate in them vicariously through the adventures of your friends and relatives, you are likely to live to a ripe old age,” I pontificated.

On my way home I felt really proud at having discovered this wonderful secret of the universe. As I concentrated my full attention on it I nearly stepped in an open manhole, and was almost hit by a bus and a dump truck as I crossed the street. As I continued through the ill-lit ghetto toward home, stepping nonchalantly among the broken wine bottles and paying no mind to the usual bunch of neighborhood muggers and punks, I thought to myself once again: “Yup, better to be safe and sane, and to live life’s adventures vicariously!”

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In order to expedite my future vicarious thrills, I might suggest the following for your next anniversary, Con & Jere: Hang-gliding off of Angel Falls in Venezuela, 3,000 feet down to the jungle below. How about that idea! If Venezuela is too far to go, there is always the old stand-by, going over Niagara Falls in barrels...

Keep me posted on what you decide, and be sure to give me a full, exciting report afterwards!

Vicariously yours,
Scott