THE GLOOM FEAR

BY

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"I sometimes go up solo and I look out at where the wing strut is attached to the wing. Then I imagine it coming loose, and the wing folds up or something, and I get this kind of tight feeling in my scrotum."

That's what a flying student of mine once said to me, making me remember having exactly the same thought. I think this feeling is an example of anxiety. The dictionary says that anxiety is fear that doesn't have an exact cause. But I think we sometimes feel afraid of something we know is unlikely to happen, and I would also classify that as anxiety.

At the drop zone, this phenomenon is called the gloom fear. It's common among skydivers of limited experience. You can tell it's at work when you see a student jumper with his canopy laid out on the ground, folded so neatly that the Army could make a training film out of the pack job.

I got a bad dose of the gloom fear when I had to make my first free-fall jump. In those days, we had to make five jumps with a piece of nylon webbing called a static line automatically opening the chute. One end of the static line was attached to the plane and the other was fastened to some little fittings that held the backpack closed. When the jumper made his exit, he'd fall about ten feet until he reached the end of the static line. Then the little cords that held the thing on to the pack would break

away, allowing some bungee cords to pull the pack open. There followed a sequence of events that ended in the canopy opening with a gentle tug on the student's harness. All the jumper had to do was to hold a stable body position and let nature take its course.

During jumps number three, four, and five, the student would have a ripcord in its normal place, a pocket on the side of his harness. Immediately upon making his exit from the airplane, he was supposed to hit a hard arch, a body position that would hold him stable in the slipstream. After a count of three in the stable arch, he was supposed to reach in and grab the handle and pull it out. This was known as a DRCP, or dummy ripcord pull. The student had to do three of these in a row successfully before he would be allowed to do a live, for real jump without the benefit of the static line.

On his sixth jump, the hapless student would have about ten to twelve seconds to find the ripcord, grab it, and pull it, or he would experience one of those sudden stops we hear about when a jumper reaches ground level without a chute. When's the last time you had to perform some fairly simple act in the next ten seconds to prevent you from dying?

In the days before my sixth student jump, I became fixated on the notion of a "hard pull." I had heard that sometimes the thing would jam up and the jumper would have to pull with all his might to get the ripcord free of its housing. If that didn't work, he'd have to open his reserve chute, a process involving an extreme number of "Gs," since the reserve parachute didn't have a sleeve to retard its inflation and prevent a hard,

whiplash-producing opening shock up there around fifteen hundred feet above the ground.

Finally the moment arrived. I got out on the landing gear strut in the ready position, my hands braced against the right wing strut. The instructor slapped me on the leg, the signal for me to make my exit. I went off reaching. In fact, I started reaching so fast that I neglected the part where I was supposed to hit a hard arch and count to three. My entire mind/body system was totally fixated on getting the ripcord and pulling it. I flipped over on my back, giving me a good view of the airplane receding up into the wild blue, away from my falling body. I realized that this was not a good position for opening a parachute. In my imagination I heard the voice of Fred, my instructor, saying "Hit an arch! Arch for all you're worth!"

So that's what I did. I immediately flipped back over into a face-to-earth position and the next thing I knew I was hanging beneath the inflated parachute canopy, just as nice as you please. To this day, I don't have any recollection of pulling that ripcord; but I must have done it, since I'm here telling the tale.

That experience was all it took to get over that particular source of the gloom fear, but I still, fifty plus years later, have the occasional dream of struggling to get a stuck ripcord free.

Whenever I mention that I used to be a skydiver, somebody invariably asks what happens if the 'chute don't open? We used to call those people "wuffos," for *"Wuffo you jump out of a perfectly good airplane, huh?"* Folks who dive with scuba gear are frequently asked what they'd do if a shark were to attack them. And I wish I had a nickel for every time someone has asked me what would happen if my airplane's engine quit. It

seems as though the first thing some non-participants often think of involves some version of the gloom fear.

Where do they get these apocalyptic notions? I think they come from our tendency to mythologize various aspects of our activities with tales of the spectacular. When I get somebody's attention at a cocktail party, I never tell about a jump where everything went exactly as planned: *I packed my chute, got into the airplane, rode up to 7200 feet, lined the plane up with the wind, exited exactly the right distance upwind from the target, fell for 30 seconds, opened my chute, drifted down, turned into the wind, and made a perfect PLF, a parachute landing fall, right on the target.*

No, who'd want to tell a story like that? Instead, what we tell strangers are stories about when things did not go at all as planned. We tell of misadventures, of parachute malfunctions, of landing in cow pastures in the midst of a herd of cattle; of being blown onto a nearby golf course and meeting a beautiful woman…

That's the kind of thing you hear from people who are telling stories about stuff they do that you don't do. SCUBA divers tell about times they see sharks, or when they ran short of air during a dive and had to come up fast, risking the bends. Pilots tell about big thunderbumpers, thick fog, and malfunctioning radios. From listening to all this stuff, you get a very distorted impression of the activity.

And don't get me started on the evening news. Those guys are trying to tell stories that might be interesting enough to keep us tuned to the commercials. "If it bleeds, it leads" is their motto. So we hear about blood and guts, of violence and

accidents: of doom, disaster and despair. That's what the T.V. mavens think will hold our attention, and I guess they're right. We all know that what we get from the talking heads at 6:00 is not an accurate representation of reality, but somehow it seems to help us form a distorted concept of how things are. On an intellectual level, we know we're not going to be on the receiving end of some stray bullet from a drive-by, but the prospect of such an occurrence is so distressing that we lock our doors, set our alarms and hide under our covers. Even though the dangers we guard against are often as unlikely to happen as winning the lottery, we act defensively and continue to buy lotto tickets, *just in case*.

Maybe the feeling of security we get from living like that is worth the cost. But I can't help feeling that many of the unlikely things we avoid impede the smooth running of a free society. When I became a flight instructor in the mid '60s, the question of professional insurance came up. I checked and found that the price of insuring myself against professional liability was very close to the total amount I was earning from that line of work. When I was appointed a designated pilot examiner, some people warned me of the extreme danger of litigation I was exposing myself to, conducting flight tests and certifying pilots' competency to perform some potentially hazardous activities in light airplanes.

After thinking it over, I told myself that *somebody* had to conduct those tests, and that I was as qualified to do the work as anyone. If I performed my function according to the standards that defined the tests, the probability of anyone taking me to court and leaving me a pauper ranged somewhere between slim and very slim. I resolved to carry on with my chosen work and

not let myself be intimidated by the prospect of unlikely disasters.

So the point of this essay is that you should probably go ahead and live your life without being too inhibited by a fear of things that are unlikely to happen. Life's too short to let the gloom fear stifle the quality of your existence.