

In Fearful Times, We Must Embrace Risk

By FERRITON JOHNSON

I live in the heart of Tucson, which, if I am to believe local authorities, has higher-than-average rates of theft and violent crime. I often don't lock my doors. I often don't lock my car. I often leave my gym bag (sometimes containing my wallet and cellphone) in an unlocked locker at the gym. I speak to strangers. I have never encountered serious crime.

Now, I am a 6-foot, middle-aged man in pretty good shape, a slew of adjectives that give me an advantage in dealing with potential criminals. If I were 5-2 — or vulnerable in any number of other ways — I might act differently.

Then again I might not. I try to act with both prudence and courage, but forced to choose, I'll take the latter. I think of a friend, a small, wheelchair-bound woman who negotiates the streets at all hours. I think of John Wesley Powell, who in 1869 was the one-armed leader of the first expedition to run the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. Listen to one of his stories:

Looking about, we find a place where it seems possible to climb. I go ahead. [my companion] Bradley ... follows. ... I gain a foothold in a little crevice, and grasp an angle of the rock overhead. I find I can get up no farther and cannot step back, for I dare not let go with my hand and cannot reach foothold below without. I call to Bradley for help. He ... cannot reach me. The moment is critical. [I am] standing on my toes; my muscles begin to tremble. It is sixty or eighty feet to the foot of the precipice. If I lose my hold I shall fall to the bottom. ... At this instant it occurs to Bradley to take off his drawers, which he does, and swings them down to me. I hug close to the rock, let go with my hand, seize the dangling legs, and with his assistance am enabled to gain the top.

What once made America different from the Old World, and the West different from the East? In the West, we were able to venture into the woods or canyons and know that a big cat or rapids might be waiting. We lived with the risk, however small, of the

opportunity to test our wits in the game of life.

Consider the uninflected calm with which Maj. Powell relates his adventure. Is that not worthy of study and imitation? That spirit once defined America, and we are acquiescing in its disappearance. Every day and everywhere we are choosing to expand police powers and to restrict our liberties in a chimerical search for a security that never will be had.

An obsession with 'security' can bleed away our lives.

Here in Tucson, the authorities have decided to hunt, tranquilize and remove mountain lions that, after a century of leaving the best real estate to us, have come looking for dinner. We are not to be allowed to take calculated risks. People must be able to roam the "wilderness" assured of no danger from any species but our own ("I'm not worried about mountain lions," a woman runner told the local paper. "I'm a lot more worried about the men on the trail.") We will have our security, even at the price of the big cats.

I don't blame the rangers. They're public servants, and they're giving the public what we want, which is security at the price of our awareness of the real nature of the world, in which like all our fellow creatures we live and suffer and die in a miraculous interdependency in which life comes, always and everywhere, twinned with death.

Go ahead, you say, don't look your doors. Wait until someone walks into your house and steals your 20-year-old television and smashes you in the head — or worse plants a bomb on your plane.

That argument surely takes on power and poignancy after the bombings in Spain last week. But Spanish authorities had heightened security measures in place for fully 18 months prior to the bombings, and still they occurred. At some point, we must declare to ourselves that we prefer risk over fear, life with liberty and faith in each other over more government intervention.

Each time I return to my untouched house I revel in my sense of freedom. I take pleasure in the knowledge that once again I have put humanity to the test and once again we have come through with flying colors. I am cheered by the thought of chipping away at the paranoia that is our current national pastime and the rallying cry of our current administration.

As for hiking among the big cats, after a lifetime of telling and writing stories I have the audacity to think that at the moment of attack, amid terror and shock and struggle I would retain one clear, enduring thought: They'll be talking about this for a long time.

To Our Contributors

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Commentary

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Ferriton Johnson's latest book is "Keeping Faith: A Skeptic's Journey" (Houghton Mifflin, 2003).