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Letters

A nation at risk?

"How Dare We?" (SN: 7/25/87, p.57) seems like a lesson in futility. Risk — or, more correctly, the perception of risk — is all in the eye of the beholder. As with magic, the uninitiated sit back and marvel at the illusion of risk, and wonder how or why people would subject themselves to the hazards involved. The examples appearing in the article are proof of the lack of understanding. The lead-in sentence puts me on the face of a sheer cliff, while it is stated that I am "desperately" hanging there. The fact is that before I got there, I first took the risk of standing up after crawling for seven months of my life, then I took the risk of climbing a set of stairs, then I took the risk of climbing a stepladder, then I took the risk of climbing an extension ladder, then I took the risk of climbing a tree, then I took the risk of climbing a pile of rocks, then I

This Week

- 148 Double-Beta Decay Caught in the Act
- 148 Chinese folk remedy may promote cancer
- 149 Abrupt extinctions at end of Triassic
- 149 Bringing back fading memories
- 150 Faces of emotion: Social or innate?
- 150 'Competition' cause of AIDS dementia?
- 151 Hybrid particle mimics AIDS virus
- 151 First test-firing for redesigned shuttle booster rocket
- 152 Plastic shocks and visible sparks

Research Notes

- 153 Biology
- 153 Environment

Articles

- 154 Detoxifying PCBs
Cover: Oily fluids in electrical transformers are a major source of toxic PCBs. With the Environmental Protection Agency having called for the disposal of these fluids within the next three years, researchers at a number of institutions are exploring ways to render them harmless. (Photo: Electric Power Research Institute)
- 156 Seeking Supernovas Systematically



Departments

- 147 Letters

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took the risk of climbing a steep hill, then I took the risk of climbing a hundred-foot cliff, etc., etc., until finally you spotted me hanging precariously (in your view) from a cliff.

In this and every example you cited in the article, one can plainly see that the "risk" is virtually nonexistent to the one "taking it." The degree of difficulty is measured and tested all along the road to the point observed by the desk jockey.

I see no correlation between a person extending his or her physical abilities beyond the norm and a person blowing the brains out of another human being, a relationship the article insinuates exists.

When Orville and Wilbur built their airplane, they didn't roll it out of the hangar and pack their suitcases in it and head for Europe, the circus doesn't ask for volunteers from the audience to try a triple flip from a trapeze, and a man doesn't buy a hang glider and go jump off Grandfather Mountain.

Better to spend the research money on something worthwhile than to waste it trying

to define shades of gray while looking through a yellow lens.

Stephen C. Brown
Inverness, Fla.

The persistence of needless risk-taking at all levels, such as toxic waste mismanagement, drunk driving, deforestation, dental neglect, nuclear weapons competition and excessive sunbathing, simply illustrates Mother's Law: "You'll take it seriously when it's too late."

It is probably impossible to structure our lives to obey *all* admonitions. How can we know which are more important? Luckily, Mother's Law has a corollary: "You'll know, dear . . . when it's too late."

Gertrude Reagan
Palo Alto, Calif.

I was amused at your recent story about researchers trying to understand the logic of

Continued on p. 153

SEPTEMBER 5, 1987

147

Continued from p. 147

risk-taking. Logic is useless as a tool for trying to understand an illogical process.

Academics, who are used to following the rules and reading consumer reports lest they make a mistake in buying ketchup, can no more discuss skydiving than the blind can discuss impressionistic painting.

To suggest that people act logically in their decision making, large or small, is to ignore the environment. Cotton coveralls are a very logical garment; why do "serious" people wear ties? Army field rations are very carefully designed to be the "best nutrition possible"; see how long your "Chez C Ration" stays in business. Millions believe in a "Supreme Being" who is going to make everything come out fair, just a little further down the line.

H. Scott McCann
Annapolis, Md.

In my mind, the prime example of suicidal behavior is our continuing to reproduce on a very depleted planet.

Harvey Lester Sperry
Farmville, Va.

"How Dare We?" made me think of a study of the flight characteristics of swallows as done by a team of penguins. Imagine their horror as they report that swallows actually leave the sane security of the earth to swoop and dive at altitudes that could be debilitating or fatal if they were to fall. Listen to their solemn advice that those deluded swallows give up their suicidal aerial cavorting, seek

professional help and, most important, keep both feet firmly on the ground, like all well-adjusted birds.

The mere thought of rock climbing, scuba diving, spelunking, skydiving or auto racing terrifies me, but that may not prove that I am sane and those folks are "suffering from maladaptive risk-taking"; rather it just might be proof that they are swallows and I, sadly, am a penguin.

Lawrence Palmer
Ann Arbor, Mich.

With respect to Rick Weiss's description, "we who pride ourselves as rational beings," I say rather, "Man is not a rational but a rationalizing animal." He does what he wants to, whether for emotional or, as Zuckerman suggests, physical reasons, and then provides himself with explanations. And by the incredible but very human process that Orwell calls "double think," he is able to convince himself that these explanations are rational.

David Goldstein
New York, N.Y.

I agree that U.S. culture has become alarmingly violent and self-destructive. However, some of the activities mentioned do not necessarily indicate a "risk-taking" disorder. I admit to not being fully informed on this subject, as I do not bullfight or hunt big game or go rappelling or knife throwing. I do, however, enjoy skydiving. I also fasten my safety belt when driving my car. I do not skydive because I think it is dangerous; I skydive because it is very fun to fly, and I know that a parachute is one of the most reliable devices

made by man — even more reliable than the airplane.

Practically anything you do involves some risk; more people die from driving their car each year than die from skydiving. People do not do these things because they enjoy the danger but because there is value in performing the particular action, whether it be practical or recreational.

There are those who like to do dangerous things while skydiving, just as there are those who like to do dangerous things while driving. However, it is not a rule that driving a car indicates a "risk-taking" disorder, nor does the act of skydiving indicate the same.

Kenneth Thomas
Iowa Park, Tex.

Whether or not his story is true, William F. Buckley is said to have related that upon his first meeting with Ronald Reagan he saw the latter exhibit what must be called (in the light of your article) "risk-taking behavior."

It seems that the projector necessary for a lecture was inadvertently locked in an upper-story room of the lecture site. So that the lecture might proceed, the President-to-be negotiated a narrow exterior building ledge high above the ground, broke the window of the room, got in and retrieved the projector.

Your article mentioned such consequences of risk-taking behavior as teenage smoking. But we should also be reminded that it is by no means impossible for risk-takers to be found among those with their fingers on the atomic trigger!

Warner Clements
Beverly Hills, Calif.

The Care & Feeding of Ideas

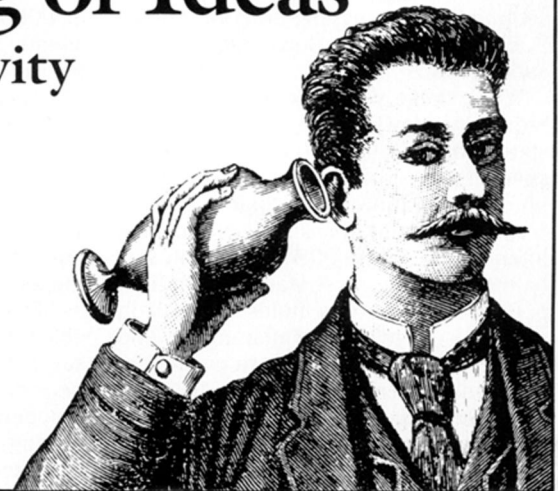
A Guide to Encouraging Creativity

James L. Adams

Adams leads a tour through the unconscious mind, the brain and nervous system, and the storehouse of memory, and points out how they work (and conspire against us) when we tackle problems. He shows that bad problem-solving habits can be broken, that money and time are your muse's best friends, that creativity involves risk but the risk is worth it and that the stereo you bought with your last bonus was not a luxury but a necessary reward. He illustrates his arguments with ingenious games and exercises that will surprise you with what they reveal about your patterns of thought. Whether you're a midnight novelist or management consultant, a Sunday painter or city planner, this book can forever change the way you approach creative challenges.

— from the publisher

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