

CHAPTER 28

CRAWLING OVER ICE-COVERED SNOW WITH JEANNIE

Being careful kills the soul.

William Saroyan

I have always thought of myself as a person who takes only carefully calculated risks after considering both pros and cons of the situation – so did my companion Jeannie, who made a sampler (four or five decades ago) stitched on burlap with the above quote. The sampler still hangs in my apartment. For example, I purchased nursing home insurance for both of us before I was 40 years old; I always checked three times if the door was locked before leaving the house; and I always arrived at the airport 30 minutes to 1 hour before scheduled departure times (even before security checks were common). However, reflecting on some incidents from the past has persuaded me that “being careful” did not always apply. Three particular incidents come to mind that probably occurred when Jeannie and I were in our 60’s.

Jeannie and I regularly attended concerts, plays, etc. whenever possible. The particular concert I recall was at Virginia Tech on a snowy evening when sleet and freezing rain were forecast. As we prepared to leave for the event, I expressed some reservations about the weather. Jeannie remarked that the icy forecast might be wrong. However, when we left the concert, we discovered the forecast was correct. The campus buildings and grounds work crew had salted the sidewalks and parking lot, so we proceeded to our 4-wheel-drive Jeep cautiously. I removed ice from the windows and we started home. The main streets we traveled had been salted, but the secondary road to our house had not been treated. We slipped and slid on the narrow, winding road, but met no other vehicle. I pulled into our steep driveway and stopped. Four-wheel drive is not much use on ice, and, in addition, the driveway had a steep drop off on one side. I knew I could not navigate the driveway up to the house. Getting out of the Jeep was tricky, but neither of us fell. Our house stood several hundred feet up the very steep hill that was covered by trees of various sizes. However, the trees were too far apart to provide any continuous handholds. We could only navigate the hill by getting down on our hands and knees and crawling. Halfway up the hill, I wondered if my graduate students would retain me as a major professor and advisor if they could witness this undignified return from a concert. I decided they would. Getting across the icy cement porch was not too difficult, and we breathed a sigh of relief. The following morning, I cautiously retraced my path to the Jeep. When I tried to start the engine, it did nothing. The battery had been stolen (the hood could not be locked on this model), and the gas had been siphoned. I believed, perhaps mistakenly, that I had earned a few points as a risk taker the night before.

A second time in the winter, Jeannie and I had to crawl again. Little Stony Creek is in a valley flanked by steep mountains. One of our favorite hikes was a trail along the creek to Cascades Waterfall, which took about 2½ hours to hike in good weather. The ice had melted in the surrounding areas, but not in the creek valley, so the parking lot at the forest reserve was empty. Naturally, we went on the hike we had planned. Actually, rather than the hiking trail, we took the access road on the left side of Stony Creek, so we only crawled in spots. Even though the road was less treacherous than the trail, I realized that one of us could fall and break an arm or leg. Some spots had been flooded and frozen, and no trees or shrubs gave us handholds. After about two hours, I tentatively suggested that we go back so we would not be caught on the access road in the dark. Much to my surprise, Jeannie agreed and we reached the parking lot before dark. Being careful may kill the soul, but it does sometimes protect the body.

A third time we also had a winter crawl. For years, Jeannie led the campus YMCA hikes. This particular one was to Angel’s Rest on the Appalachian Trail. The name describes the hike perfectly. The trail goes up steeply from the parking area and then along the ridge to a cliff with a superb view of the New River. As we neared the ridge, Jeannie had trouble with one eye. A doctor on the hike feared that her trouble might be a detached retina. But she was in charge of the hike, so Jeannie insisted on going to the overlook. I decided to stay where I was near the ridge so that I could get Jeannie to the hospital emergency room on our return. We made it to the hospital, but the doctor on call for eye problems could not be reached. The next morning, the problem was identified by our regular doctor as an unusual level of floaters. Sometimes, being careful is good for one’s conscience, if not for one’s soul.

Looking back over an 84½ -year lifespan, this old geezer feels that he did not lead a life of excessive caution, which is almost certainly due to Jeannie. Her belief in a favorable outcome for any decision was contagious.

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