

**Risk-taking: Don't Be Disappointed by the Things You Did Not Do
by Jimmy B. Foster, P.E.**

When have you been at your peak performance? Is it at times when you are relaxed, when there are no pressures, when there are no demands being made of you? I doubt it. Each year, during the months of May and June, we have the opportunity to watch the play-offs in the NBA and the NHL. Was this just another game for the players in these games? Could they take it or leave it? Did any of the players decide to stay home and watch it on TV? No, they thrive on the challenge, the excitement, the competition. And so should we.

I've come to eagerly anticipate these occasions – these occasions of adrenalin rush, of living on the thin edge of disaster, of being out of my comfort zone. I teach a Bible study class each Sunday morning. I'm on the thin edge of disaster. On occasion I'll make a presentation to the City Council. I'm on the thin edge of disaster. In years past, I have gone to war zones, places of civil unrest, places where Americans were hated, places where life was basic and simple and potentially deadly. I've met with government officials in China, Viet Nam, the Sudan, India, Iraq, and numerous other countries around the world. I've met with the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland and worked in refugee camps in Tanzania across the border from Rwanda. I was on the thin edge of disaster.

You're sitting there saying, "That's not the Jim Foster I know." The one I know is quiet, reserved, an introvert. And you will be correct. That was the Jim Foster at the age of 25 or 35. He's still like that, yet he is eager to search for that challenge, that excitement, that competition.

Today, I'm going to talk to you about taking risk. Intelligent risk, but taking risk nonetheless.

In getting out of my comfort zone, I have traveled to 57 countries. Let me tell you about a few of those experiences. I've been attacked by African killer bees. I've conducted crisis management workshops in South Africa – prior to the election of Nelson Mandela as President. South Africa at that time was documented as the most unsafe country on the face of the earth. I've lived through 2 coups d'état resulting in night-time curfews lasting for several months.

Have you ever been really afraid? I have.

In 1993, I found myself in Peshawar, Pakistan. Peshawar is like an old west town in the early United States. There were plenty of people with guns, knives, and ammunition belts. I had just left the airport with my hosts when a fully armed, turbaned man hopped in the back of the vehicle. I was

alarmed. Two years earlier I had served on a crisis management team to work for the release of two of our personnel who had been taken hostage in Afghanistan. Was my own kidnapping taking place? I was in Peshawar to send off a convoy of vehicles loaded with food for the people who lived in Kabul. Kabul was under siege, and only the young and old remained. They were short of food. As we drove closer to the Afghanistan border, I realized that this man was not taking me hostage, but he was my bodyguard. At the Afghanistan border, I saw the convoy of eighteen large vehicles, fully loaded with food basics. This convoy was accompanied by seventy-three (73) fully armed military vehicles. That's what it took to get \$100,000 worth of food shipped into Kabul.

In 1994, I found myself in the Sudan – at a time when Osama bin Laden had his training camps there. Based on reports from others who were in the country, I knew that I could be threatened with strip search at the airport. I knew that sharia, women being beaten, was practiced in the country. The Sudanese government wanted to know where we would be every day we were there, the route we would be taking, and the times of our arrivals. In Port Sudan, on the Red Sea, we had to give up passports for four days – never an enjoyable event. Yet some degree of success was realized. We were able to talk with the Sudanese government about the construction of hafirs, underground water storage facilities, for Ethiopian refugees.

On another occasion, I found myself in northern Iraq – in the Kurdish controlled area of Iraq. I was there to observe the operation of a well-drilling rig that we had placed in a certain valley. I also met with the valley leader to discuss agricultural and livestock needs. The leader's compound was on top of a small mountain. From that vantage point, I watched F-16's dive out of clouds and strafe neighboring hillsides with machine gun fire. The Turkish military was fighting the PKK, a Kurdish extremist group that felt that Kurdish statehood could only be achieved by militaristic means. After about two hours of watching the battle, we were told that we needed to leave. The commander of in the neighboring valley had been killed in battle, and it would not be safe for us to stay there. Again, there was a positive result - wells were drilled in northern Iraq, and the Kurdish people received help with livestock and agriculture.

All of this has led to a life that is continually searching for meaning. But, in that process of searching for meaning, I have discovered that risk is involved.

When we meet successful people, we may be tempted to envy them for their great "luck." Of course, their success has nothing to do with luck at all. That's why Virgil, the greatest of the Roman Poets, wrote 2,000 years ago, "Fortune sides with him who dares." It's a clever way of saying good fortune doesn't come to us; we go to it by taking risks. Life is all about

taking risks. And we willingly take chances every day. Whether you drive, take public transportation, or walk to work, you are risking getting into an accident. Every time you go to sleep, you risk not waking up! But you go ahead and do it anyway.

A few years ago, *Time Magazine* carried a special article on risk-taking entitled, "Life on the Edge." This article discussed what makes people want to jump out of airplanes, ride their motorcycles off cliffs and participate in all sorts of high risk adventures. The article noted that, according to American Sports Data, Inc., participation in so-called extreme sports is way up. Snowboarding, mountain biking, skateboarding, scuba diving, you name the adventure sport—and the growth curves reveal a nation that loves to play with danger. But so do hospital emergency rooms, as more Americans than ever are injuring themselves while pushing their personal limits.

If you were in Atlanta in September 2004 for the APWA Congress, you may recall the talk by Dr. Glenn Singleman and his wife, both of whom are extreme sports enthusiasts from Australia. My wife and I spent some time with them in Atlanta. I even received an e-mail "Happy New Year's" greeting from Dr. Singleman the first week in January.

Now some of you have wondered at times, "What possesses a person to want to push the envelope like that?" We may never fully understand a person who likes to live on the edge. Some of you may be surprised to learn that, for some of us, the best years of our lives have been lived on the edge.

Why do some people want to engage in high risk activities? The *Time Magazine* article mentioned that some behavioral geneticists think that risk-takers possess a thrill-seeking gene that predisposes them to engage in high risk activities. Israeli scientists, in studying specific stretches of DNA, found that people who liked to live on the edge tended to exhibit longer versions of a gene known as D4DR, than did subjects who were described as laid back and reflective. So, this gave me a valid explanation when my wife was wondering what could possibly possess me to want to go to Indonesia to help the tsunami victims there. Or to go to Afghanistan to confirm the departure of a convoy of 73 military vehicles taking a shipment of \$100,000 worth of food into embattled and encircled Kabul back in the early 90's. Honey, it was just my D4DR gene kicking in.

Now, wherever you are on the risk-taking scale, the truth is that risk is simply a part of life. Try as you might to stay "comfortable," sometimes life simply forces you out of your comfort zone. Larry Laudan, a philosopher of science, has spent the last decade studying risk-management. He summarizes literature on risk management in nineteen principles. The first

principle is the simplest: Everything is risky. If you're looking for absolute safety, you chose the wrong species. You can stay home in bed (to avoid risk)—but that may make you one of the half-million Americans who require emergency room treatment each year for injuries sustained while falling out of bed. You can cover your windows—but that may make you one of the ten people a year who accidentally hang themselves on the cords of their Venetian blinds. You can hide your money in a mattress—but that may make you one of tens of thousands of the people who go to the emergency room each year because of wounds caused by handling money—everything from paper cuts (for those at my income level) to hernias (for the wealthy).

Try as we might, we cannot eliminate risk from life. Life is a risk.

Risky = "*parboleusethai*" (pa-rab-o-leu-se-thai) = a gamblers term that meant to stake everything on the turn of the dice.

In the days of the early church there was a group of men and women called "*the parabolani*" (*pa-rab-o-lan-i*), the gamblers. Now this wasn't a group of people that got together on Mondays to play dominoes for money. No, it was their aim and object to visit the prisoners and the sick, especially those who were ill with dangerous and infectious diseases.

In AD 252, a plague broke out in Carthage, a city under Greek rule at the time. The people of that city threw the dead bodies outside of the walls and ended up fleeing the city in terror leaving the sick and the dying to perish. Cyprian, the main church leader of that area gathered his people together. They buried the dead and nursed the sick back to health...they saved the whole city because they were willing to take a risk.

The public works profession needs the *parabolani* (*pa-rab-o-lan-i*), the gamblers, the risk-takers. Now you may never have reason to visit someone with an infectious disease or visit a political prisoner, but you will face risky situations.

And facing risky situations causes fear, and fear, my friends, is a formidable foe in any profession.

What separates achievers from ordinary folks is their willingness to take optional as well as necessary risks. In 1979 I was given the opportunity to travel to Indonesia. Up to that time, the most distant place I had traveled had been to Juarez, Mexico, and the Canadian side of Niagara Falls. I was City Engineer in Grand Prairie, Texas, and there seemed to be a promising career before me. I was not a risk-taker. I was quite satisfied being on the drafting board designing public works improvements or talking with my fellow engineers.

Yet, in Indonesia I found that I enjoyed the cross-cultural experiences, the challenge of a foreign language, and the complexities of a thought process so different from my own. That served as the catalyst for me to begin a career as a missionary – first in West Africa and then throughout the world. This was the beginning of the end of my adrenalytis.

Have you had similar opportunities but rejected them? For example, a new job? Did you ask yourself the question: What if I don't like it? What if I don't like my new boss? Can I really handle the new responsibilities? What happens then? I think I had better stay where I am.

Or have you had the opportunity to offer a new service, to implement a new process, but the obstacles seemed to be too many and too overpowering? You know that the old way doesn't work well any more, but it does work. So, why change it?

People who think like that don't understand what true security is. Security can never depend on outside things and circumstances. It only comes from within. If I continue to try to solve today's problems with yesterday's tools, where's the security? Can't I lose it as others in the industry pass me by? On the other hand, if I'm used to taking risks, I will have built an inner strength, a resiliency, and an ability to cope in tough circumstances. Those who refuse to take risks to protect their "security," willingly live in cages, trapped by their own fears. If we want to do something badly enough, we will be willing to give up being a caterpillar. Turtles can't advance without sticking their necks out, and neither can we.

Snakes have to shed their skin before they can grow. We, too, have to shed our skin, the skin called "our comfort zone." We hate changes. We dislike breaking our routine. We detest trying something new because if we're not used to doing it, it is uncomfortable. But if we're always doing the same thing, how can we grow? Has your organization done the same thing, the same way for the past 20 years? We are meant to grow, meant to experience the unlimited adventures offered by life. So, let's practice shedding our skin, bursting through our present comfort level. Let's keep stretching by regularly taking risks. Let me quote a few nay-sayers from years past.

- "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers." -- *Thomas Watson, chairman of IBM, 1943.*
- "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." -- *Ken Olson, president, chairman and founder of Digital Equipment Corp., 1977.*
- "The actual building of roads devoted to motor cars is not for the near future, in spite of many rumors to that effect." --*Source: Harpers Weekly, August 2, 1902. p. 1046.*

- "This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us." -- *Western Union internal memo, 1876.*
- "I'm just glad it'll be Clark Gable who's falling on his face and not Gary Cooper." -- *Gary Cooper on his decision not to take the leading role in "Gone With the Wind."*
- "Radio has no future. Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible. X-rays will prove to be a hoax." -- *William Thomson, Lord Kelvin, British scientist, 1899.*
- "If I had thought about it, I wouldn't have done the experiment. The literature was full of examples that said you can't do this." -- *Spencer Silver on the work that led to the unique adhesives for 3-M "Post-It" Notepads.*
- "With over 50 foreign cars already on sale here, the Japanese auto industry isn't likely to carve out a big slice of the U.S. market." -- *Business Week, August 2, 1968.*
- "Airplanes are interesting toys but of no military value." -- *Marechal Ferdinand Foch, Professor of Strategy, Ecole Superieure de Guerre.*
- "There will never be a bigger plane built." -- *A Boeing engineer, after the first flight of the 247, a twin engine plane that held ten people.*

Each day gives you 86,400 seconds of life. How you use it is up to you. Why not use it to take risks and experience the adventure of life, sometimes frightening, but always exhilarating. Don't you agree with Helen Keller, who said, "Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all."?

Mark Twain said, "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the anchor lines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

Conclusion: The fact is you can't avoid risk! It's inherent in life! In fact taking risks is the only way to live. Otherwise, we become like the guy I read about in this poem:

There was a very cautious man who never laughed or played.
 He never risked, he never tried, he never sang or prayed.
 And when one day he passed away, his insurance was denied,
 They claimed that since he'd never lived, he'd never really died!

The following poem (author unknown) summarizes our subject well.

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool.
To weep is to risk appearing sentimental
To reach out for another is to risk involvement.
To expose feelings is to risk exposing your true self.
To place your dreams before a crowd is to risk ridicule.
To love is to risk not being loved in return.
To live is to risk dying.
To hope is to risk despair.
To go forward in the face of overwhelming odds is to risk failure
But risk we must, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.
The person who risks nothing is one who does nothing, has nothing, is nothing.
He may avoid suffering and sorrows, but he cannot learn, feel, change, grow, or love.
Chained by his certitudes, he is a slave - he has forfeited his freedom.
Only a person who takes risks is FREE.

Several years ago, my wife and I went to see the movie "Hotel Rwanda." At the end of that movie, the refugees from "Hotel Rwanda" (Hotel des Milles Collines) have found safety in the company of the rebels. They're getting ready to cross the border into Tanzania where refugee camps have been set up. I was in those camps in 1994. Approximately 1 million people were massacred in Rwanda in 1994. Virtually nothing was done by the Western world. Very few people were willing to take the risk. Recall the words of Mark Twain: "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do." By taking risk, you can change the world. By taking risk, you can change your profession.

I recently read about an 87 year old lady who decided to get a college degree. She became quite a hit with her much younger classmates, and was so popular that she was asked by the football team to speak at their annual banquet. As she approached the podium, she dropped all of her note cards. Frustrated and embarrassed, she leaned into the microphone and simply said, "I'm sorry I'm so jittery. I'll never get my speech back in order, so let me just tell you what I know."

"There are only four secrets to staying young, being happy, and achieving success. You have to laugh and find humor every day. You've got to have a dream. When you lose your dreams, you die. There is a huge difference between growing older and growing up. Anybody can grow older. That doesn't take any talent or ability. The idea is to grow up by always finding opportunity in change. Have no regrets."

"The elderly usually don't have regrets for what we did, but rather for things we did not do. The only people who fear death are those with regrets."

I received this quote from a friend the other day. "Life should NOT be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in an attractive and well preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways, chocolate in one hand, a glass of wine in the other, body thoroughly used up, totally worn out and screaming 'WOO HOO what a ride! I've made a difference!'"

My challenge to you: Be a public works professional who takes risks.

Is there a new process that should be tried? Do it!

Is there a new service that needs to be offered? Do it!

Is there a design that begs to be changed? Do it!

Is there a public works professional in you who yearns to be free? Do it!

Is there a meaning in life that you have not yet found? Quite likely, to find it, you will need to take risk. Fortune sides with cities, city employees, consulting engineering firms, and vendors that dare – that take risk.

Don't be disappointed by the things you did not do.