

Going Up?

I hated being late for work.

Almost an hour behind my usual start to the day, I ran into my office building on a beautiful late summer morning grumbling to myself about my stupidity. The previous night's event may have ended much later than it should have but that was no excuse for not being able to make it into the office at my normal time of around a quarter to eight. I consoled myself somewhat with the contrived rationalization that I could lay part of the blame on the lateness of the train; it had delayed my arrival by being some fifteen minutes behind schedule.

An elevator was standing with its doors open and a full crowd already on board.

Room enough for me, I'm sure.

I had almost reached the inviting doors where the faces of the passengers were encouraging me to take a leap for it when the doors slid shut inches from my grasp.

Fuck it! More delay!

Only a few moments passed before another elevator arrived. I joined six other people awaiting its arrival and we stepped into the cavernous compartment. I moved to the far end of the large grayish green colored elevator and stood by the doors at the rear. I would be exiting via these doors when we reached my floor. I smiled at one of the passengers whom I recognized, but I couldn't remember her name. I ignored the other passengers. One of the men was wearing too much cologne. The smell of it hung in the air. No one spoke.

Within a few moments the doors closed.

The elevator started on its upward journey.

Or did it.....?

Oh my God! What's happening?

"Holy shit!" a tall man by the elevator wall opposite me screamed. It might have been me.

At that instant, tremendous vibrations shook the elevator and the sound of wind rushing down each side of the elevator gave me the impression the elevator was moving up at a frightening speed. The piercing sounds and frightening sensations escalated and lasted for what seemed like about a minute but, I was later to concede, probably lasted no more than about fifteen seconds. During this time I could hear other noises, that of 'stuff' falling on the top of the elevator. It sounded like bits of steel and some concrete or plaster. I had never been so scared in all my life. I sank to my knees. Others were doing the same. I was shaking uncontrollably.

Oh Christ! Is this how it all ends? I don't want to die! I really don't want to die!

Dust started to fill the elevator as the vibrations and the noise of the wind disappeared. The sound of a ringing bell, - an alarm of some sort, took over.

An Amazing Personal Account by Ian Robb

"What's happening?" one woman cried out.

The elevator was now stationary. An incessant mechanical voice over the intercom informed us that the building management was aware of a problem and would investigate. I didn't find this very reassuring.

We all crouched on the floor, too stunned and terrified by what was happening to say anything to one another. Two of the women were in tears, one screaming hysterically.

Poor woman. She must be petrified.

I went over to her and put my hand on her shoulder. I'm not sure why but it seemed like a good idea. The other woman who was on the floor beside her holding her hand looked up at me, a weak smile on her face.

Water started to drip into the elevator.

Two men close to the doors we had entered through tried to pry open them,

"Come on, you obstinate bastards, open up!" one of them instructed the doors, but to no avail.

We all stared at one another, unsure of what to say - other than to utter meaningless expressions of shock while asking each rhetorical questions such as "What the hell is going on?"

The intercom to the security desk appeared programmed to continue repeating the increasingly annoying and highly questionable confirmation of building management's efforts to investigate.

"Jesus Christ, that's irritating! Why don't they shut it off?" complained an overweight man who was standing at the other end of the elevator nervously clutching his computer case.

As if hearing his plea the announcement stopped.

What the intercom did not allow us to do was speak to a live person to whom we could explain our dilemma. The line appeared dead.

In unison we banged on the doors loudly and shouted, "Anyone out there? Can someone open this door? Can you hear us?" There was no response.

Eventually we sat back down on the floor and fell into silence. Obviously they knew we were trapped and help must be on its way.

Come on folks. Open the damn doors and get us out! We've had enough of this.

Time passed. Too much time. No one seemed to want to talk much. There was no sign of efforts being made to rescue us.

The tall man, in an attempt to lighten our mood, stepped into the center of the elevator looking rather like a stand-up comedian at a night club. "Ok, folks, let's see what the stars have in mind for us today."

He opened up the newspaper he was holding. "Let me have your astrological signs."

We each in turn played along with his attempt to lighten our mood and gave him our signs. "Mine is Pisces," I announced.

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"You will have a chance encounter with an old friend," the man read out.

A living one, I hope.

No one's horoscope offered any plausible insights into their being stuck in an elevator with the possibility of a gruesome death awaiting them.

Probably just as well.

Some minutes later, a short bald-headed man who up to now had been very quiet started to rant about the inefficiency of the building's facilities. "You'd think in this day and age they could manage the simple job of running a bank of elevators that didn't break down every day. Something needs to be done about it."

No one paid him any attention.

Why don't you just sit down and shut up, you moron?

Anger was now blending itself with my fear. Surely someone out there cares enough to rescue us.

The moron continued to air his views about the building, expanding his analysis to the root cause of the problem as he saw it. "Cock ups like this are clearly all the fault of those clowns in the White House."

Receiving no signs of support from his fellow passengers for his sermon and probably seeing in the faces of the rest of us that he was inviting a punch in the mouth, he wisely elected to pipe down.

We all express our anxiety in different ways.

Despite the occasional outburst of complaint, frustration and obvious fear from a couple of the male passengers and the voiced despair of one female passenger we were a relatively subdued group. Maybe we were all too fearful of what was awaiting us to spend time and energy in conversation.

The silence that had descended once again was punctuated by the occasional and disconcerting thump of a new piece of steel or concrete landing on the elevator roof.

The silence held its own threats.

I was growing more alarmed by the lack of apparent activity outside the elevator doors. It was slowly dawning on me that perhaps no one knew of our plight.

More unwelcome noises from over our heads.

A long twenty minutes or so had passed when expectedly the faint sound of raised voices on the other side of the doors could be heard. This prompted us to bang on the doors again while shouting at the tops of our voices. Again, no response. The faint voices subsided and disappeared.

Silence returned. The minutes ticked on.

We're going to be in here forever.

"I think," another man spoke up, "we must have risen several floors before the elevator dropped into the basement of the building."

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"That sounds possible," one of the women said. I, while seeing some value in this notion, could however come up with no logical reason to support my concurrence.

Someone will realize soon that we are trapped and will rescue us. Won't they..?

Other theories were then raised. None held any strong conviction from their proposers and so the subject died. One common thought did prevail though, eliciting further debate; the steel and concrete falling on the top of the elevator could very well be coming from the support structure beneath the huge elevator motor perched many floors above their heads. This prospect restarted the loud sobbing from the most distressed woman.

"We're going to die!" she whimpered between sobs. "I know it."

Everyone else became more desperate than ever to escape from what was starting to take on the semblance of a potential tomb.

I wonder what will happen to my daughters if I don't get out of here. Oh, don't think that way you idiot! Of course we'll get out!

Time dragged and so did the lack of conversation. We were all deep in our own personal thoughts about the possible outcome of our awful predicament. Perhaps, like I, they were all thinking about its effect on those we might never see again. I could hear a man and a woman softly praying

Could someone tell us when it's time to panic? I feel as if I'm almost at that point.

More than an hour after being trapped I heard tapping coming from the side of the elevator close to where I was sitting. I tapped back. A faint voice followed. "Where are you?" the voice asked.

The caller, a man, explained he was in an elevator next to or behind the one in which we were trapped. Had we heard from anybody? No, but how come two elevators had failed at the same time? Did a bomb go off on the floor where the elevator motors were situated? That was the latest theory.

This is surreal. It's as if we are acting out the part of Dumas' book, The Count of Monte Cristo, where Edmund Dantes is communicating with a fellow prisoner in the Chateau d'If. God, I hope I'm not stuck in here as long as he was in the Chateau. I don't think I'd look good with a beard.

We both agreed that the first ones out would tell our rescuers that others were trapped. The two-way conversation ended.

All at once it hit us that our predicament was becoming increasingly dangerous. The perceived, imminent prospect of a multi-ton elevator motor crashing down on top of us became magnified into a terrifying threat.

Shit, someone get us out of here!

We banged on the doors again and shouted for help at the tops of our voices. I could hear the fear in all the voices, my own being as pronounced as the others'.

Nothing!

We banged some more and rubble fell onto the floor through the small gap between the top of the elevator doors and the frame around the doors.

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I wonder if that stuff was jamming the doors.

I suggested that we try opening the doors again. Two of the men pulled on the doors from opposite directions. The doors opened a crack. More rubble fell. Through the small opening we could see a sight we had not expected.

"We're on the ground floor, in the lobby!" I said.

The elevator must have stopped on or returned to the lobby. Immediately, all of us hooked our hands around the edges of the doors and slowly pulled them apart.

Relief flooded over us. Suddenly we became a team. I felt a closeness with my fellow passengers that had eluded me to this point. The expressions on the faces of the others indicated they felt the same way too.

Let's get going.

The lobby appeared almost deserted.

Where is everyone?

A security guard ran up to us. We all screamed accusations of incompetence at him at not attempting to rescue us. The guard hurriedly explained the building had been hit by an airplane that terrorists had flown into the upper floors. "Leave the building as quickly as you can" was his only instruction.

Running through what resembled a battlefield we left the building.

"Look at those windows," the overweight man said staring at the three-storey high lobby windows. "They're red."

"My God! It's blood!" a woman shrieked.

The gruesome sight of the blood stained windows forced us to look through them to the plaza beyond. Horrified we looked out in numb agony on a gray field of multiple mangled bodies and bloodied body parts. These were to become a memory that would remain with me forever.

Leaving the North Tower of the World Trade Center my ears were assaulted by the roar of the fire some thousand feet above me. I looked up.

Oh my God! My office is in the middle of that inferno.

I ran from the building as the sudden roar from the collapsing South Tower deafened me. Dodging the dense, swirling dust and the cascading rubble, I ran to the edge of the dock and jumped onto a waiting ferryboat just as it started to back out into the Hudson River.

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It was several days before the full impact of the sight of the fire really hit me. Only then did I realize that while I had been in the elevator, many friends, acquaintances, and colleagues were dying on the floors of the building where I should have been.

I cried.

I was to cry again, at the most inconvenient of times, over the next few months as the effects of the shock released their grip on me.

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I had never before suffered shock in such a horrific manner. It took me weeks to understand the confusion it created in my mind, and it took almost six months for my own fortunate escape to sink in. During this time periodic nightmares rudely interfered with my sleep to remind me of my brush with death.

The most difficult part of my recovery was learning to handle the mourning process. It occurred to me that one is endowed with an innate ability to mourn the death of one or two close friends and colleagues, however devastating their passing may have been. Mourning the forty-seven friends and business acquaintances I personally had lost presented a challenge I found especially troubling and difficult to handle. The sense of guilt that manifested itself when mourning just one lost friend at a time, to the exclusion of all the others, haunted me for a very long time.

At a reunion lunch one year later, I and my fellow passengers exchanged experiences. In an odd sort of way it was reassuring to discover that my recovery process had been very similar to theirs. I didn't feel quite so alone as a result. While friends and acquaintances had been very sympathetic there was no way they could fully appreciate the sheer terror of what we had lived through.

Thoughts such as "Why did I survive?" still to this day ring in my brain. The "Why not me?" syndrome is one that counselors are constantly wrestling with when confronted by survivors. Luck, God, and being in the right place at the right time are the choice answers.

Now though, many years since 9/11, life has returned to normal, - more or less. My memory banks, however, preclude the return to complete normality. I am, of course, very grateful to have survived and yet I can think of few changes that the effects of the tragedy have had on me. I have always loved life and the pure joy of being alive. This was neither been enhanced nor diminished as a result.

My political, religious and social beliefs remain intact despite the efforts of many to tweak them in accordance with their own views to prove some point about the attack on the World Trade Center and the appalling loss of life that ensued.

Reigning over the legacy of questions and confused emotions, though, one outcome remains paramount; like many others, I will never, never forget.