The Afterlife of Near-Death

Every experienced flier has sensed a whisper of death in a blast of turbulence at 25,000 feet, and many will swear they've heard their names called, loud and clear.

It's not a moment people forget.

"All I could think about," said a 50-year old nurse who'd recently been in a plane that lost an engine, "was my garage. How I hadn't cleaned it, and how messy it would be when someone came in and saw it. It's crazy what you think about."

The mind reels in the presence of death.

From the shore and TV screens, the evacuation of a US Airways jet that ditched in the Hudson River on Thursday looked almost stage-managed, a slow-motion rescue complete with heroes and zero death.

But on the inside — and inside the passenger's heads — the action was far wilder.

No one knew how long that plane would stay afloat, and those with a strong imagination surely glimpsed what could come: icy water moving shoulder high and higher; a shrinking, dark pocket of air; bobbing heads wheezing their last breaths. One man stripped to his underwear, in case he needed to swim; a mother climbed over seats with her baby to avoid a stampede.

Recollections of brushes with death are often infused with a quality close to madness. "Though my senses were deadened, not so the mind: its activity seemed to be invigorated, in a ratio that defies all description," wrote Rear Adm. Sir Francis Beaufort, who fell off a boat in Portsmouth harbor on June 10, 1791, certain that he would drown.

Some pray, others leap into action; many report feeling a floating sensation. Yet it is the way the experience lingers in the imagination that may be most important, both for the immediate aftermath and for the months and years to follow. And while some sink into despair, struggling with jagged images of their near-extinction, for many the experience has an entirely different meaning.

"There's a host of people who speak about being horrified, traumatized, who talk about a distortion in time afterwards, almost as though the accident or experience happened moments ago," said Kenneth Manges, a clinical psychologist in Cincinnati who has treated survivors of floods, fires and armed robberies. "But others come through the trauma re-energized, with new sense of living and vitality — they're very grateful, and feel blessed to have survived."

This response mirrors what researchers call near-death experiences, in which people — surgical patients, heart attack victims who have been resuscitated — report transformational experiences, in the fogged cleft between life and death. In series of studies of such cases, including hundreds of patients and survivors of accidents, Dr. Bruce Greyson, a professor of psychiatry and neurobehavioral sciences at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville, has found that most do not qualify for a psychiatric diagnosis. People who report out-of-body experiences, or sensations of floating, or religious transformation, often are preoccupied with the experience afterward, but do not see it as having a negative impact on their lives.

On the contrary: near-death experiences may protect many people from the anxiousness, the hyper-vigilance and nightmares that characterize post-traumatic stress.

"I do not advance that view from any theoretical perspective, but purely from the empirical evidence that the more positive near-death experiences tend to leave people with a sense of meaning and purpose in the traumatic experience and in life in general that buffers long-term emotional distress," Dr. Greyson wrote in an e-mail. "The positive emotion in the experiences seems to leave them with a feeling of enhanced self-worth and a sense that they are not alone in dealing with life's traumas."

As they gain distance from the event, some people who see meaning in it may unintentionally embellish the experience, amplifying its religious or transformational qualities: What did not kill them made them stronger, closer to their children, to themselves, to their church.

For all of those who escaped Flight 1549 as the plane floated in the Hudson on Thursday, the very public nature of the accident could also affect its impact. Paul Greene, a professor of psychology at Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y., and coauthor of the book, "FDNY Crisis Counseling," said that the survivors will be barraged by images of the experience, in newspapers and on TV and the Internet, as well as by questions that might not be so easy to answer.

"They'll have expectations to deal with, people asking them, 'What did you learn in the final moment, what epiphany did you have?' " he said.

On the other hand, Dr. Manges said, the collective success of the evacuation, and the outpouring of concern, may give survivors some comfort. "Some may feel less isolated as a result of that," he said, "and people who are isolated are at risk for post-traumatic stress."

For whatever churning consumed the minds of those 155 people on board, they were just as responsible for their own escape as were the police and rescuers. "That pilot was a hero, fabulously trained, and the flight attendants, too," said Lee Clarke, a sociologist at Rutgers University and author of "Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination," "but if those people didn't keep their wits about them, they would not have made it — they were heroes, too."

Like survivors of many previous emergencies, including 9/11 and the evacuation of an Air France flight that skidded off a runway in Toronto and crashed in 2005, they did not lose control. They were civilized and practical, whether obsessing about God, glory or the garage.

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