

Perspective, please

We're all going to die. That's a fact. But you'll probably live through the next roller coaster ride, despite hand-wringing in the wake of a few tragedies. When assessing real risks, the facts can be a useful, if stubborn, thing.

By Laura Vanderkam

It's summer again, season of freak accidents — and widespread freakouts about them.

In late June, for instance, a 12-year-old boy died after riding Disney World's Rock 'n' Roller Coaster in Orlando. It made national news and on cue, two days later, *Time's* website published a piece called "Too Many Thrills?" reflecting many peoples' concerns. "Another roller coaster death," the teaser said, "prompts speculation that the era of faster, higher and scarier may be coming to an end."

Careful readers might notice that similar speculations abound every time there's a ride accident.

After all, a Disney fatality last year sparked a previous round of similar pieces citing widespread concern about lax regulations: "Are parks putting too much risk in thrill rides?" — *St. Petersburg Times*, June 19, 2005; "Disney World death raises calls for more theme park oversight" — *The Associated Press*, June 17, 2005.

Yes, when it comes to things such as the annual one to eight deaths each year on amusement park rides, it's easy to feel uneasy. In news stories, three items make a trend. Because all ride accidents make headlines — for instance, the recent death of an 8-year-old boy who had just ridden the Fireball at the annual Ionia Free Fair in Michigan on July 22 — we start to wonder: Are we safe? Should the government do something about deadly rides?

Well, in a word, no. Or at least not until governments address the really dangerous things in our lives, such as furniture or bathtubs. Indeed, despite the approximately 175 million visits we paid to North America's most popular parks last year, park rides kill fewer people than such freak things as igniting or melting nightwear, hot tap water and venomous spiders.

Turns out, when it comes to what kills us, we have trouble accurately assessing risks. News media reports don't help — and that's too bad,

because in this age of mass media, we need a conversation about what risks we're willing to accept in order to have a good time. The answer could be higher than we realize.

Researchers have identified a few biases that make it hard for us to view risks rationally:

► First, Baruch Fischhoff, a professor of social and decision sciences at Carnegie Mellon University, notes that people are pretty good at monitoring the risks they see and hear about. "What people have difficulty doing is figuring out when appearances are deceiving," he says. "If the news media report a lot on one thing and not on another, it's hard for people to intuitively correct for that."

A person dying on a roller coaster is a national story because it happens so rarely. A person struck crossing a railroad track, however, is seldom more than local news. With about 500 railway trespassing fatalities per year, it happens every day.

► Second, when something big happens, news stories and our brains tend to view the big event as evidence of a change in risk-signal levels, rather than an outlying statistic. So we stop, re-evaluate and often crack down on pass laws before sanity prevails.

School violence, for instance, fell 50% from 1992 to 2002. Yet 2000's Million Mom March, seeking more gun control, cited the 1999 Columbine massacre as evidence that school violence

was epidemic.

► Finally, we have a higher tolerance for controlled, understood risks than scary-sounding ones we can't control. We brazenly sell peanuts in vending machines, though peanut allergies kill 50-100 people each year.

Yet when anthrax killed a few Americans shortly after the 9/11 attacks, we treated our mail boxes like biohazards for months.

None of these tendencies is a problem if we know them. At talks, Fischhoff likes to hold up a picture of a hand, shaded to show patches, such

as the ring finger, that seldom get washed. When you see the picture then simulate scrubbing, the missed spots become obvious. Because you have the full picture, you can wash differently.

Unfortunately, when it comes to risk, we seldom see these realities. We don't realize that the sheer existence of mass media has changed the perceived risk level, making major stories out of fluke risks, particularly risks we can't control. That makes everything — including amusement parks — seem scarier than it was.

Reading Bill Bryson's upcoming memoir, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, I was shocked to learn how many risks parents let kids take in the 1950s. Young Bryson hung off the back of his dad's moving car. He biked — helmetless — all around town by himself. No one he knew in Des Moines got hurt doing those things, so they seemed OK.

Now, if one child anywhere in the USA is abducted at the movies, it becomes national news — and the perceived risk shifts.

Yet our policy discussions haven't caught up with this change. We've decided everything is risky, which is true. Soft bodies moving through a world of sharp objects and careless people do suffer damage. Indeed, we have to die of something.

Children's deaths make us sad, but we don't honestly believe the standard of safety should be zero deaths. If so, we couldn't drive or even take the train. For the social utility of transportation, we're willing to tolerate far more deaths than amusement park rides produce.

Which raises the question: What level of risk is acceptable when the upside is plain old fun?

Though a huge accident could change our minds, the current fatality statistics on rides suggest that, despite our hand-wringing, Americans might be willing to tolerate a handful of deaths per year in the pursuit of happiness. That's not the kind of thing that's easy to talk about, but it's a conversation worth having. While hurtling upside down at 60 mph might not be smart, it's smarter than making laws because freak accidents make headlines.

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By Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY

To fear or not

Number of deaths in the USA in 2002 from these sources:

- 2 — Amusement park rides
- 10 — Venomous spiders
- 13 — Igniting or melting nightwear
- 40 — Hot tap water
- 66 — Lightning
- 352 — Bathtub drownings
- 785 — Fall involving bed, chair or other furniture
- 48,366 — Transportation accidents

Source: U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, National Safety Council.

You are Entitled to Your Own Facts

Among the most common bon mots in policy discourse is this: You are entitled to your own opinions but you are not entitled to your own facts. On the surface this phrase may seem insightful and even clever, but it is wrong. You are entitled both to your own opinions and to your own facts for the reasons that follow, reasons based in part on *Citizenship Papers* by the brilliant essayist Wendell Berry.

I. A fact is not a thing. A fact is, instead, something thought to be known about a thing. "For example, H₂O may be about water, may represent water, but is not water. Knowing this formula would not help a person recognize water let alone ice or steam. Water is water because it is the absolute sum of all the fact about itself whether or not humans know all the facts about it."

II. The building blocks of rational thought are facts, pieces of data that can be proved or demonstrated or observed to be true. There are, for example, enough accumulated reliable facts in physics and engineering to enable the building of great bridges and enough accumulated reliable facts in biology and medicine to enable the curing of certain diseases. This we know to be true, but it is most particularly true in physical contexts. Facts in social, political and economic contexts are far more difficult to prove to be reliably true.

III. We possess more facts today than we ever possessed before and presume, through empirical processes, to be able to fill in the gaps between facts and thereby accumulate truth in a general trajectory toward finding ultimate or entire truth.

IV. In this reasoning we tend to forget that the accumulated facts upon which our knowledge may rest are still not reality, they only partially represent or describe reality.

V. "The only true representation of a thing, we can say, is the thing itself... The only true picture of reality is reality itself."

VI. It is, therefore, impossible for humans to know reality in any complete or final way. We correctly marvel at the mapping of the human genome, but a map of the human genome is not one-hundredth part of a human.

VII. The scientific mind seeks to make itself totally rational and in the search for rationality is particularly comfortable with facts that are quantitative representations of reality.

VIII. Copying scientific progress in the physical context, there is a kind of mind operating in other contexts "that is trying to be totally rational, which is in effect to say totally economic... This mind shows us the 'cost-benefit ratio.' And here we arrive at the crisis of rationality... Reason fails precisely in the inability of the cost-benefit ratio to include all costs... This kind of accounting excludes all coherence except its own... The cost-benefit ratio is limited to what is handily quantifiable, namely money. The failure of reason comes to light in the recognition of those things that cannot be quantified."

IX. How shall benefits to this generation explain costs to the next? How shall the benefits of this generation explain costs to the watersheds, the groundwater and the polar ice caps of the next generation? Can the discipline of these and similar questions inform our rational search for facts and our understanding of reality?

X. Yes, we know a different kind of mind. This mind is not irrational, but neither is it primarily rational. It is a mind less comfortable with reality than the mind that aspires only to reason, and its aspirations are far more difficult to define.

XI. This mind sees the work of government in context and tries to derive its

standards from that context. This mind seeks to know the costs and benefits of governmental programs in context and to know the narratives of those bearing the costs and receiving the benefits. This mind seeks to know whether citizens are being well served by their governments and whether those who are providing those services are enhanced or diminished by their service. This knowledge cannot in any conventional sense be measured but may be a truer representation of reality at the level of citizens in context than any quantitative measure.

XII. These contexts runs counter to rationalist tendencies to seek predictability and general applicability. Contexts seek variation. Contextual variation is a powerful reality, a reality that resists general applicability and assumptions of predictability and resists rationally derived facts that presume to represent it.

Narratives are often an effective way to represent the realities of neighborhoods or commonwealths. These narrative are facts, facts as accurately representing reality as numeric facts. Furthermore, narrative based facts are more likely to be helpful in the search for human betterment.

XIII. "In order to work, in order to live, we humans necessarily make what we might call pictures of our world, or our places, of ourselves and one another. But these pictures are artifacts, human made. And we can make them only by selection, choosing some things to put in the picture, and leaving out all the rest.

XIV. "From the standpoint of the person, place, or thing itself, of reality itself, it doesn't make any difference whether our pictures are factual or imagined, made by science or by art or by both. All of them literally are fictions—things made by humans, things never equal to the reality they are about.

XV. "Facts in isolation, out of context, are false. The more isolated a fact or a set of facts, the more false it is. A fact is true in the absolute sense only in association with all facts..."

XVI. "Because our pictures of reality are necessarily incomplete, they are always to some degree false and misleading..."

XVII. We tend to imagine that knowledge based on newer facts is necessarily truer than knowledge based on older facts; or that empirical truth is truer than truth otherwise acquired.

XVIII. "We may say, then, that our sciences and arts owe a certain courtesy to reality, and that this courtesy can be enacted only by humility, reverence, propriety of scale, and good workmanship."

Because public administrators understand the realities of governmental context and the interactions between governmental context and their work, they are entitled to their own opinions, and given their proximity and expertise their opinions should be particularly respected. And, public administrators are entitled to their own facts. Some of these facts may not be numeric, but public administrators are nearest to the context of governmental reality and are the most likely to have the truest representation of that reality. Both opinions and facts are the tools of policy deliberation, the weapons of policy warriors. Opinions and fact in the hands of skilled public administrators are most likely to contribute not only understanding reality but to improving it.

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