

Fearing the Worst, Saturday Night, 2004

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Just imagine: Terrorists are planting bombs in mailboxes near your home, right beside the park where your children play, along the street your children walk every day to school. Those bombs are aimed at you, your children, your way of life. Would you let your children out to play? Would you let them walk to school alone? To ask the question these days is to answer it. And yet, back in 1966, when I was nearly 10 years old, terrorist bombs occasionally blew up in my neighborhood, Westmount, PQ, and yet I walked up the hill in my short tunic every single school day, without my mother at my side. When I was a girl, a bomb blew up the mailbox a block from our house, another up the hill, a few blocks west of my school, yet another near Westmount City Hall, within spitting distance of the boys' school where my brothers went. After that mailbox blew up, the boys were sent home in their grey flannel shorts and jackets. They opened every mailbox they could find on the way back, just to check. My mother took the danger in stride. "We were concerned of course," she told me recently, "but we didn't take it personally." In spite of everything, it seemed safer then. Terror was out there, but it wasn't personal.

Today, we don't feel so safe. My daughter Zoe is the same age I was back in 1966, nine-going-on-ten. She has startling grey-blue eyes and long coltish legs and still goes to bed with her favorite stuffed dog and her well-worn yellow blanket, although by day she wears stud earrings and narrow jeans and sings along with Avril Lavigne when I drive her to school. Would I let her walk to her girls' school 2.5 km away alone? No way. Or to the park overlooking the ravine, which is populated mostly by dog lovers? Not a chance. Wondering whether this was my own private phobia, I emailed other parents in my daughter's Grade 4 class to see whether they let their girls out alone:

"Are you NUTS?????" one parent wrote back. "Neither kid can even go to the attached GARAGE alone...they must go together. It takes 2 seconds for someone to grab and run, not even worth thinking about." Another was wistful about the days when kids played hide-and-seek outside until the streetlights turned on: "Thanks to Paul Bernardo, we never let (our daughter) go off our property by herself," the parent wrote. "My daughter and I were at the movies and she had to use the bathroom in the middle of the show, so I had to take her. It's just common sense not to let them out of your sight. Street smart training doesn't seem to apply when you hear of kids being forced into cars at gunpoint or at knife point."

Everyone in Toronto knows why parents react this way. Two names, Holly and Cecilia, inject an instant shot of fear into the veins of many parents, the fear that their child will be snatched by a stranger, a sadistic pedophile. On May 2003, Holly Jones, age 10, was grabbed while walking home in the west end of the city. Her body parts were discovered a day later. Cecilia Zhang was abducted in October 2003 while sleeping at her suburban Toronto home. Her remains were discovered by a hiker at the end of March, three days before what would have been her 10th birthday. After a year of intense media coverage, we know the girls' names, their faces, the terrible end to their short lives. It doesn't feel safe anymore out there. It's like living in an Alfred Hitchcock movie where everything looks normal, bland even, except that you know the danger is lurking unseen, off camera. Just when you think it might be O.K. out there again, you get another shot of fear -- from a December 2003 letter from the school principal, saying that a teenaged student was sexually assaulted on her way home, on a street lined by large 19th century brick houses and grand trees, only two kilometers from where we live; or from the news last year than

an elementary schoolgirl was attacked in her school washroom; or from the tale circulating these days about how a girl used her Tae Kwon Do training to disable a stranger who grabbed her in the elevator.

If these kinds of stories scare the wits out of me, I am clearly not alone. Even before Cecilia was abducted, nearly six out of 10 Toronto parents polled by Ipsos Reid were “very concerned” about child abductions. Since Holly was murdered, demand for streetproofing has jumped 500 per cent, according to Child Find, the organization that helps track missing children by posting pictures of some of Canada’s missing children on trucks and utility bills. About 20,000 kids were even fingerprinted by Child Find that year — apparently to help I.D. the kids’ remains in the event they are murdered.

Now it would be perfectly normal to assume that this a more dangerous world for a kid than the one I grew up in, that kids are far more likely to be attacked by a stranger than they were when I was a child. Yet the reverse is true. It is safer to be a kid in Canada today than when I was a child. Children have a far better chance of reaching age 10 than they did in my day, thanks in part to new drugs, bike helmets and seat belts. And contrary to public perception, there has been no increase in murders of children by strangers. In 2002, only one child under 12 was murdered by a stranger, one out of 4.5 million Canadian kids. Back in 1966, two young kids were murdered by strangers. Then and now, a child is far more likely to be murdered by someone he or she knows, like a parent, than by a stranger. Abductions of children by strangers are exceedingly rare too. Last year, 67,809 Canadian kids disappeared, but the vast majority either ran away or were abducted by parents or friends. Of these large and alarming numbers of missing kids, 35 were abducted by strangers, including two in Toronto -- two of nearly 1 million Toronto kids under 16. Yes, you say, but what about sexual assaults? When I was a kid no one talked about sexual assaults against children, and yet lots of us were fondled, which is by far the most typical form of pedophilia. Those kids of assaults are more likely to be reported today, and yet surveys of victims show no evidence they have increased. In any case, parents ought to be more wary of an uncle or a soccer coach than a stranger in the park. Only 9 per cent of sexual attacks against girls under age 12 were perpetrated by a stranger, according to Statistics Canada. The rest were committed by family and friends.

Yet we fear the rare killer rather than the common one, the distant threat instead of the one in our own homes and neighborhoods. When we think about food, for instance, we focus on the rare or non-existent threat while brushing off the real one. Judging from the increased sales at organic food shops, a rising number of Canadians are worried about what pesticides and genetically modified food will do to them and their children. They think organic food is healthier and safer. Yet organic does not protect you against the real food threat, the bugs that will make you sick. About 7.5 million Canadians get sick each year from eating raw meat or fresh fruit and vegetables. It’s a serious threat: A few hundred Canadians will die each year from common food-borne bugs. (These figures are extrapolated from the numbers collected in the U.S., which, unlike Canada, tracks these kinds of outbreaks.) Yet I confess that I use a sponge in the kitchen and only a single pair of barbeque prongs, practices that put me and my daughter at risk of eating contaminated food. Like most Canadians, I don’t focus on that common but potentially deadly threat because I’m thinking about food threats that seem scarier -- like mad cow disease, or the

PCB count in farmed salmon, or genetically engineered corn, even though none of them have killed a single Canadian so far.

In his influential book, *The Culture of Fear*, sociologist Barry Glassner argues that many of America's biggest fears -- about the homicidal stranger, for instance, or road rage, or black men, silicone breast implants, or plane wrecks -- are either grossly inflated or entirely unfounded. Last year's SARS outbreak hit after the book was published (and publicized in Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*) but it serves as a perfect example of Glassner's thesis. Here was a new and unknown bug, but even once authorities realized it could not spread by air and would be confined to a hospital setting, or to family members who had close contact with the afflicted, the fears spread wildly. Toronto was shunned, emptying hotels and restaurants. Even my own sister, who lives in a New York suburb, was reluctant to visit after authorities declared the outbreak under control. Yet the disease did not turn out to be a big killer. It killed 44 in the Toronto area -- far fewer than the 4,776 Canadians who died in 2001 from influenza and pneumonia. Those numbers, by the way, included nearly 100 Canadians under age 45. Yet I didn't even bother to get a flu shot last year. Exaggerated fears also influence the way our governments spend money to protect us. Governments, for instance, invest heavily in airport security systems, presumably to prevent terrorists from causing another 9/11 disaster. We accept, perhaps grudgingly, the manhandling before we climb aboard an aircraft these days. After all, on that terrible morning, about 2,800 people died in planes, the twin towers and on the ground. That's about the same number of people who died in car crashes in Canada that year. Yet when provincial governments try to install photo radar to crack down on speeding and curtail the national death toll on the road, they're criticized for invading drivers' privacy! As of this spring, only one province was using photo radar to nab speeders, Alberta.

So why do we fear the rare threat, the stranger who killed one young child in 2002, rather than the car, which killed 155 kids under 14 that year? Or perhaps we should fear the driver: Half of the fatal car crashes involve drivers who make mistakes, like speeding or inappropriate lane changes. So why do we fear the far rarer threat? Exaggerating the threat of a bad thing happening is a telling sign of classic phobias that are written into our psychic DNA, like the fear of vermin, heights, or the dark. Yet even those of us who do not suffer from a psychiatric illness overestimate the likelihood of some threats, while underplaying others. Psychologist Paul Slovic, who was studying the boredom factor in gambling choices at the University of Michigan while bombs were blowing up mailboxes near my childhood home, has spent over three decades trying to answer that question. His interest was piqued by a question from a geographer who wondered why people return to earthquake and flood zones. Slovic realized his lab work didn't help him understand the perception of danger, so he began studying the difference between how people perceive risk -- the likelihood of something bad happening -- and the actual probability of disaster, as measured by experts based on mortality statistics.

To assess risk, experts ask a key question: What is the likelihood that something bad will happen? And if it happens, how bad will it be? The science of risk assessment dates back to ancient Egypt, but its modern version started in the 17th century when European mathematicians analyzed games of chance, with dice or cards. The study of probability revealed, among other things, that seemingly random phenomena in large numbers displayed a pattern. If you toss enough coins, for instance, you will notice that heads come up half the time. But -- and this is a

big but -- the large-scale pattern could not predict what would happen for any single toss. It can't tell me whether my daughter will be the one in a million. The theory of probability, however, has become incredibly useful in the assessment of the risks of all kinds of scientific innovations, from new drugs to nuclear power plants.

Risk assessment is supposed to be a step-by-step, rational judgement, extracted from ordinary human feeling. Yet in the real world, we humans don't think that way. We don't calculate probability the way the experts do, and say to ourselves, "Only one in 500,000 Toronto children was abducted in 2002, so I guess it's ok to let my 10-year-old run in the park on her own." That's not how our brains naturally work when we have to make a decision in a complex, uncertain world. Instead, the way we assess the risk of child abduction is subjective, emotional, and highly susceptible to the power of imagery. One clue came in the 1970's from a path-breaking study by Princeton psychologist Daniel Kahneman and late Stanford psychologist, Amos Tversky. Kahneman won the Nobel prize for economics in 2002 for the research, which explored the way we make a decision in uncertain times. To simplify a complicated probability equation, they found that we rely on simple mental shortcuts that depart from the theory of probability. We use recall, for example. If something is easy to imagine or remember — like the terrible abductions of Cecilia or Holly -- we think the event is more likely to happen than one that is hard to imagine. So much for the traditional economists' model of the rational man, motivated solely by self interest.

This mental shorthand was highlighted by a survey Slovic and fellow researchers conducted with college students and members of the League of Women Voters. They, along with experts in risk assessment, were asked to rate the frequency of various causes of death. The women and students thought more people died from homicide than diabetes. In fact, the reverse is true: Diabetes claims far more lives than homicide. Yet homicide get more play in the news, so college students and women thought homicides happened more often than they actually do. Kahneman and Tversky's research started to explain why people like me are more afraid of the stranger than the car. Cars kill far more people than strangers, yet I can't name any of the kids killed by cars, whereas I know the names of the girls killed last year by strangers.

In a series of experiments, Slovic found that ordinary people perceive risk in a different way than the experts do. Slovic asked the League of Women voters and college students to rank a list of 30 items, including vaccinations and lawnmowers, according to risk. They both rated nuclear power as the Number One riskiest hazard. Experts in risk assessment, on the other hand, rated nuclear power number 20. Asking more questions, Slovic understood why: When lay people thought about the potential catastrophe of a nuclear power accident, they felt a sense of dread. Hazards that are dreaded --- like nuclear power or child abductors -- are considered riskier by the public, even though they kill far fewer people than cars. In subsequent experiments, researchers found if a hazard is considered to be involuntary and unknown, the public will judge it riskier than more common hazards that kill more people. In other words, we don't see cars as risky because we know about them; we feel we're in control at the wheel. That feeling of control makes us comfortable, especially in an era when we want to control everything, when the word "accident" has been banished from the vocabulary of many safety experts who have overhauled our playgrounds and equipment to prevent injury, or at least mitigate the damage. The stranger in the

park, on the other hand, is prowling way outside our sphere of control. He's the ultimate outsider. We can't control him. We can't even see him. So we fear the apparition.

The perceived outcome, good or bad, also influences the way we rate the risk of an activity, Slovic noticed in several experiments. If we like doing something, like powder skiing through the glades, we underestimate its risks. It makes no logical sense -- enjoying something does not imply anything about its level of risk -- but we do it anyway. If on the other hand something awful and dreaded happens — like the abduction of a child or the 9/11 terrorist disaster — we think it's more likely to happen than it is. "Probability goes out the window," says Slovic. His conclusion, after three decades of research: "Risk is a feeling," he said. "Risk isn't out there, waiting to be measured. Human beings have invented the concept of risk to help them understand and cope with dangers and uncertainties of life. Although dangers are real, there is no such thing as real risk or objective risk."

Psychiatric studies show that while some phobias occur because people have had a bad experience, about half of them are caused by vicarious conditioning, said Dr. Neil Rector, a specialist in anxiety disorders at Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Say you have a phobia about spiders, which is not only exaggerated but impairs your everyday life. You may never have been bitten by a spider but the phobia began when you saw someone else bitten by a spider. Or maybe you just talked to someone who's afraid of spiders. That's why phobias run in families, Rector noted. The media can also spread the fear, which is why some people fear flying even though they've never stepped on a plane. Just reading the stories in the media can inflame fears in people suffering from phobias, which is why Rector advised his patients to avoid the newspapers during the SARS crisis.

In April, the newspapers in Toronto were full of stories of Cecilia, little Farah Kahn, who was butchered by her father in 1999, Douglas Moore, the pedophile murderer who killed himself in jail, and the sex abuse scandal at Upper Canada College. We hear about the bad news; we rarely if ever learn about the risk of it happening. Bad news dominates the news and crowds out the positive stories about the spread of local democracy in Pakistan, or the revival of forests or the Red Wolf, Patrick Watson noted in a speech at the University of Toronto this spring. (As Glassner notes, America's murder rate declined 20 per cent between 1990 and 1998, and yet the number of murder stories on network newscasts increased by 600 per cent.) Watson, a thoughtful T.V. journalist who once served as chairman of the CBC, laid part of the blame on the mental laziness of journalists. As any city reporter knows, if you're pursuing the story of a priest accused of molesting a child, you've got a good shot at a coveted spot on the front page. If you're researching a story on how the mortality rate of young Canadians has been cut in half since I was a kid, and you're headed for somewhere close to the obituary page.

It wasn't always that way. When I was a child, the news was very different. I perused a month of front pages of *The Gazette*, Montreal's local English newspaper, in April 1966. The headlines covered the national debate over the death penalty, the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, the imminent launch of Quebec's Civil Code, and that holdover from the Cold War, Gerda Mudsinger, the alleged German spy playgirl who had affairs with a couple of ministers in the Diefenbaker government. The only time I saw the word panic in a headline referred to the possibility that Ottawa bureaucrats might have to speak a little more French. The news lens in

1966 focused mainly on political and economic institutions and leaders, rather than the terrible things that happened to children around the corner. When the paper did cover the death of a child, the story appeared on an inside page, in short, terse terms (“Janitor finds baby girl’s charred body”). There was no outrage from editorialists, no pained comment from columnists or talk-show hosts. It did not make terror personal. The stories never made you think it could happen to you.

Since then, the news business has changed dramatically. The number of media channels has exploded, with the arrival of cable and satellite T.V., talk shows, tabloid newspapers and Internet chat sites. It has revved up the volume, so if you want to be heard, you have to scream loudly. To grab attention, news reporters have borrowed the story-telling techniques of the entertainment industry, including the age-old technique of scaring the audience. The media, for commercial reasons, has turned fear into a lens to view the world, according to Arizona State University professor David Altheide, author of the book, *Creating Fear*. It magnifies and even distorts concerns, risks and dangers, he wrote. “Rarity has been replaced by typicality.”

Fear sells; it always has. One might wonder why. In ancient Greece, Aristotle suggested that audience want a safe, confined space to experience the rising tension of knowing something fearful and tragic is about to occur, followed by the release provided by the moment of catharsis. Maybe people feel the need to explore the dark recesses of the human condition, Aristotle suggested. Or perhaps they just want to let off the steam building up inside themselves. The difference now, as University of Toronto philosopher Mark Kingwell points out, is that the media offer no catharsis: “There’s no relief, so a constant anxiety throbs in the background.”

The authorities can restrict the spread of fear by giving the public prompt and complete information to help them weigh the risks and benefits of an action, says Dr. Douglas Powell, a food safety expert and assistant professor at the University of Guelph. Yet too often authorities remain silent, or deny the problem, Powell argues in a book he co-authored, *Mad Cows and Mothers’ Milk*. They do not tell the public promptly what they know; they do not explain the risks or the actions being taken to prevent or mitigate the problem. That silence creates an information vacuum that fear mongerers are happy to occupy. So the gap between what the experts know and what the public knows grows wider. A classic example: When Mad Cow sickened a cow in Alberta, the government’s top vet appeared just about every day on T.V. to explain the risk and what the government was doing about it. The public trusted him; beef consumption in Canada went up. But when the story broke about a potential PCB threat in farmed salmon, no one from Health Canada bothered to communicate the risks to the public. Consumption for farmed salmon dropped 20-50 per cent at retail. It shows, Powell argues, that if people are given good information to help them weigh risks against benefits, they can make reasonable choices.

Powell may be right. Learning how rare it is for children to be attacked by strangers makes me feel more comfortable about letting my daughter go out to play on her own. But that confidence is fragile; the dry language of probability cannot compete with the vivid power of the images of Holly and her family, on the first anniversary of her murder. The world seems more dangerous than it is, because the media and interest groups have every reason to make it so. They know that fear grabs you; measured reporting does not. So I suspect I will continue acting in irrational ways, ignoring real hazards while obsessing about marginal ones. It makes me a little sad, because Zoe will miss something I treasured as a child: A little freedom to play alone in the park.