

Challenge Authority: Memoir of a Baby Boomer

Scared? I Ain't Scared of Nuthin! (Well, maybe a few things)

I think I'm about as brave as any American male, braver. Many studies show vast numbers of Americans, at least 75 percent by most estimates ("Fear of Speaking in Public" 2013), experience some degree of anxiety when speaking in public (known as glossophobia). For many people, it is ranked as their greatest fear—greater than accidents, diseases, or even snakes.

I felt glossophobia. In high school and my undergraduate years I seldom spoke in class. Not because I didn't know answers or have decent questions, but because I was afraid. However, breaking out of my shell in graduate school classes and teaching undergraduates allowed me to later give scores of speeches as a peace organizer, Santa Barbara City Council candidate, and general socialist rabble rouser. I appeared on many TV and radio shows and managed to overcome my anxiety. Not just overcome, but I became a more than decent public speaker.

I always felt a perverse desire to confront the fears gnawing at my confidence. As the big four-o approached, I began a series of birthday events to challenge my remaining fears. (And maybe a bit to prove to myself I wasn't some "has-been" fearful of accepting physical challenges.) You know, like the dread of having your skin punctured. Come on, who doesn't panic when imagining a bullet digging into your flesh with that icky splat sound, like a hand spanking a baby's butt? Or the terror generated when a knife thrust pierces your belly and bright red arterial blood begins to seep around the edges.

Bullets and knives were a bit much so I decided to start small and on my 38th birthday (January 18) in 1990 I had my left ear pierced. I know, I know, it's something nearly every female and more and more males do in their lifetime, but give me a break. I was 38 years old and voluntarily piercing my flesh. A guy has to start somewhere. After confronting the flesh piercing fear, I moved on to other concerns.

Next year around my birthday in 1991, I tackled my largest anxiety causing situation—fear of heights. By fear of heights, I don't mean climbing a tree to rescue a cat or repair a roof. I mean heights where there is little or no protection and if I fell death was a real possibility.



Me ready for lift off, January 1991.

As with skin puncturing I started small, a glider flight in the Santa Ynez Valley about 30 miles north of Santa Barbara. I'd flown in powered airplanes many times without any problem—high altitude but you are encased in a steel hot dog with wings and engines. But what about a steel hot dog without engines?

Actually it was a very pleasant experience, silently gliding along riding the updrafts. However, it was not a true challenge—I didn't have to worry about engines failing.

Enough of this sissy stuff. The next year (1992) I turned 40 and went for some serious anxiety producing heights. Deb and I decided jumping out of a hot air balloon with only a bungee cord tethering me to the balloon was more of a challenge. You bet.

On Saturday January 25, after a night of hard partying we drove to the foothills above Santa Barbara to the hot air balloon launching site. I was surprised, but happy, to note that there was not a “one-size-fits-all” row of coffins near the launch area. Even in winter, the brush around the site was velvet green with a spectacular view of the sparkling Pacific Ocean. It was a good day to die. Since I had a slight (maybe more than slight) hangover, becoming a red spot on the ground was not such a bad option.

I signed in, paid my money, and watched other idiots, I mean “brave” souls, rise to the heavens in a wonderfully colorful balloon. The routine was quickly established: put on a harness, attach the bungee cord to the harness and an anchor in the balloon then rise up in the balloon (at least 500 feet) attached to the ground by very long ropes; stand on a two by three foot shelf on the OUTSIDE of the balloon; then jump to your death.

My name was called, here we go. Deb dragged me over to the balloon and I squirmed into the harness and made damn sure the bungee cord (what is a bungee cord other than a really thick rubber band) was connected at both ends. We ascended into the heavens, perhaps my final destination in a few minutes. I stepped, well trembled, out onto the shelf and looked down. No way. Then the manhood test commences. The crowd below begins a countdown, “five, four, three, two, one, jump!” I jumped. The wind whipped my face and through my hair. But strangely, I didn’t feel I was falling. Instead the ground was making one hell of an effort to reach up and smash my frail bag of liquid and bones body. Before that happened I began slowing down, the bungee cord reducing my velocity. “Ha, ha, you don’t get me this time,” I yelled at the earth. After bouncing up and down a few times the balloon descended. Back on the ground I stumbled over to Deb and we embraced. Wow!



Bungee balloon for the jump of death.

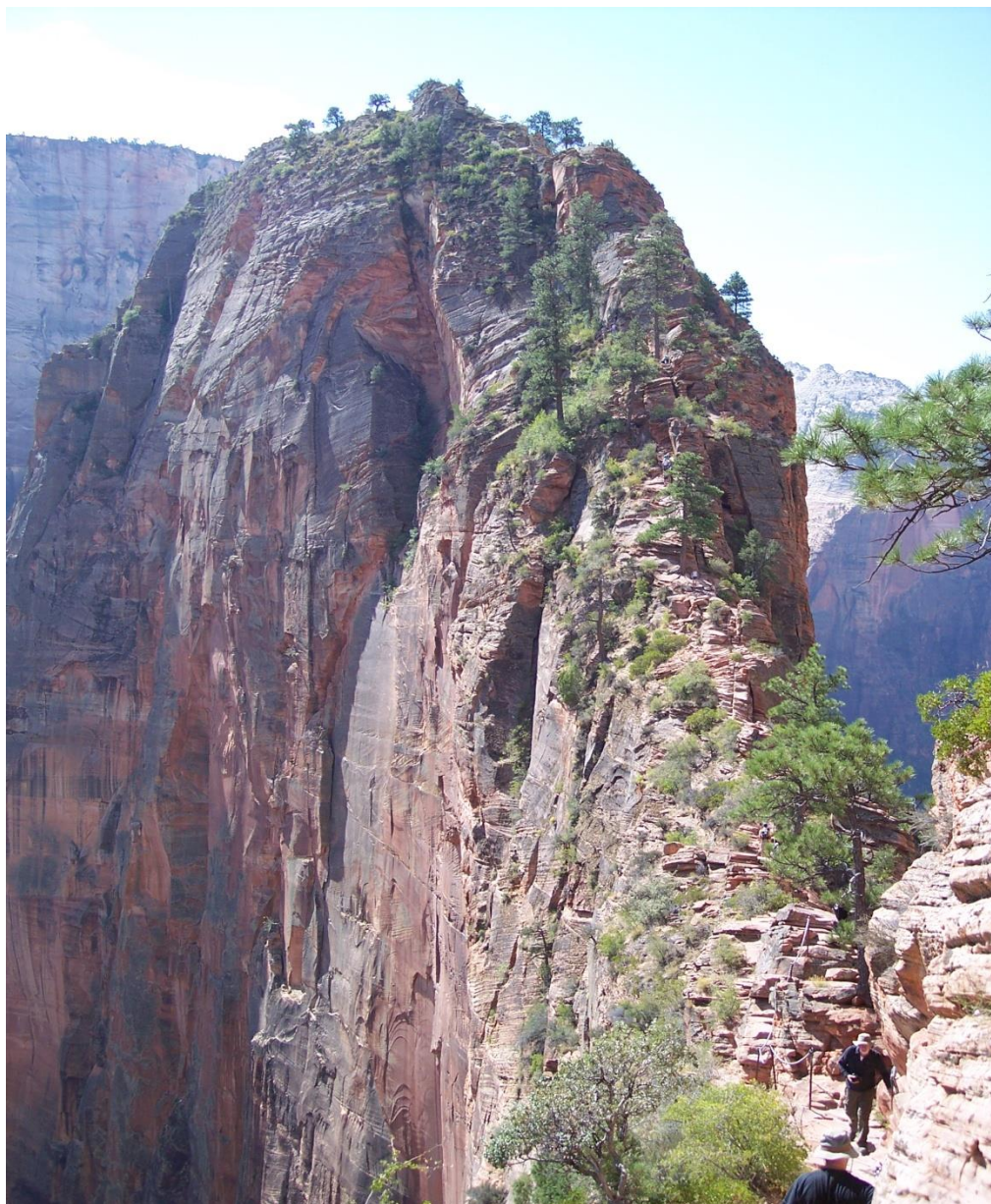
That was an experience. You might think any fear of heights would dissipate. Nope. I’m still uneasy around heights with little protection from falling, like hiking on a narrow trail up against a near vertical cliff, while using a chain pounded into the rock as a handhold. Deb and I have done several such hikes over the years.

Or the challenge a few years later when we visited the Stratosphere Casino and Tower in Las Vegas. The Tower, jutting 1,149 feet into the Vegas skyline, is the tallest freestanding observation tower in the United States. At the top are several rides. One, Big Shot, has 16 seats

arranged around a smaller square tower. Strap into a seat against the small tower atop the large tower more than 1,000 feet above the ground. In seconds 16 people are catapulted 160 feet into the air at 45 miles per hour (“Stratosphere. Las Vegas Thrill Rides” 2013). Yeah, that’s for me. Of course we tried it. I thought my shaking would loosen the flimsy looking bolts holding this Rube Goldberg contraption together. We survived.

For me, some fears, such as public speaking have little impact. I suspect because ultimately I control my performance—if I prepare and thoroughly know the subject, speak slowly and clearly, make eye contact, and keep my gesticulating under control (I would be mute if my hands were tied) I will do well. No problem. However, if I am traversing the last half mile of the Angels Landing Trail in Zion National Park all bets are off. As the official Zion National Park website notes:

The last half mile is across a narrow sandstone ridge. Anchored support chains are attached along some sections of the sheer fin. Sheer cliffs at high elevations while hiking on a narrow fin. Not suggested for children or those with a *fear of heights* [emphasis added]. Avoid standing near the edge at all times! Do not hike the trail when it is wet, storming, or when high winds are present (“Angels Landing” 2013).



The last section of Angels Landing Trail, Zion National Park. Notice the very narrow trail with an elevation gain and vertical cliffs on either side, 1996.

What they don't mention is that over the years several people have plunged to their death hiking the Angels Landing Trail. Of course someone with a fear of heights would avoid this trail. Nope, Deb and I conquered this trail in 2006 while in our 50s.

I'm at the age where there is no doubt that my fear of heights is permanent. There are two major differences between this fear and a more mundane fear such as that of public speaking. First, with the former I have no control over several crucial variables—a fellow hiker jostling me and I lose my footing, a violent gust of wind knocking me off a cliff face, and so on. Secondly, while I may be embarrassed due to poor public speaking, a mistake on a narrow elevated hiking trail can easily lead to major injury or death. Some fears are relatively easy to conquer with experience, while others, no matter how often they are challenged, linger on like an annoying cold sore that never goes away.

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