

The Atlantic

Of Fear and Flying

... and terrorism too.

By James Fallows

May 21 2014

Portion of the cover of Erica Jong's 1973 book *Fear of Flying*, which is linguistically but not conceptually related to the topics discussed here.

Last night [I mentioned](#) the disconnect between things that are frightening, from sharks to airline flights, and things that are likely actually to do us harm. Several reactions worth noting:

1) From a reader *who understood the illustration I deliberately left out*, to see if anyone would notice. Of course that illustration is terrorism and America's fearful response to it.

As academics [Ian Lustick](#) and [John Mueller](#) have argued for years, along with [Benjamin Friedman](#) (formerly of MIT, now of Cato) and [mere journalists](#), the *fear* of terrorist attacks, and the responses provoked by the attacks of 2001, have done far more damage to the country than even those original, devastating blows. Many more Americans died in the [wholly needless](#) Iraq war than were killed on 9/11; the [multi-trillion-dollar cost](#) of the war eclipses any domestic budgetary folly; the damage to civil liberties and American honor internationally has been profound; and so on. All this was all born of fear, often cynically inflamed, not realistic assessment of danger.

This reader cited an online item, "[You Are More Likely to Be Killed By Boring, Mundane Things than Terrorism](#)" and added, "This is perhaps the most dramatic example of the disconnect between fear and danger." Yes, except for "perhaps."

2) *Back to airlines*. From Jeremy Davis, of Seattle:

I suffer from panic disorder and agoraphobia, both of which have put a bit of a damper on my love of aviation (I wrote about the clash of those two aspects in [an Air & Space article](#) last year). But I'm also an aeronautical engineer.

The point I'd like to make is that, even with in-depth knowledge of the systems and structure of aircraft and aviation, fear can manipulate how we observe the world around us and skew how we interpret our senses.

During my first panic attack (on board a flight from LAX), my brain invented half a dozen explanations for why I was suddenly vertiginous and fighting to breathe. Some of those explanations were medical, but most were bizarre inventions about the cabin pressure supply lines being blocked or the aft pressure bulkhead succumbing to cracks. None of these were plausible from an engineering standpoint, but the bond between my fear at that moment and the act of flying on a commercial airline was forged so well that even now (a decade later), I still can't board a commercial flight.

So while I agree that writers tend to play on the public's unfounded fears about flying, we shouldn't discount the ways that fear can warp how we view, and subsequently recount, our experiences. Ultimately, I think it's an editor's duty to balance a writer's artistic license and honest belief in the experiences he or she felt with the publication's integrity and adherence to verifiable facts. I can only hope that my editor and I toed that line better than the *NY Times*.

Of course Mr. Davis is right. Our emotions and fears *are* beyond rational control. That's why we call them "emotions." And his *Air & Space* article is very good, including its climax when a pilot-colleague helps him escape his panic attacks with a comforting ride in a small airplane.

As I read Jeremy Davis's article, I naturally thought of Scott Stossel's memorable cover story [for our magazine](#), drawn from his [memorable book](#). All of these are precisely about the logical mind's inability to contain pre-logical fears. That is a big enough problem when it affects individuals. It's something else—and something that *should* be easier to recognize and curb—when it affects whole institutions, from journalism to national government. I know that the "should" shows me to be a quaint meliorist.

3) *Back to cars*. From another reader:

I liked the note re being scared in a normal car ride. I have often given a little monologue that goes something like this.

Imagine for a moment that the personal automobile had never been invented. We are all riding around in trains, trolleys, busses, etc.

Now, along comes an inventor who invents the personal automobile. He lobbies the U.S. Senate to get the government to build roads. They have a hearing. At some point, we get the following interchange.

Senator: So, how fast will these "cars" go?

Inventor: Oh, maybe 70 or 80 mph.

Senator: And, how are you going to keep them from running into each other?

Inventor: We're going to paint lines on the road.

We would still be riding in busses.

4) On to the *planet as a whole*.

I realize that this question is more profound than the questions related to air safety, though I've had that same thought many times myself while barreling down the highway.

I also would apply it to the distinction between the Cold War [with its dangerous nuclear standoffs] versus the Global War on Terror with its [fear-inducing] apocalyptic imagery in the messianic sense (and that goes for the jihadists as well as our own homegrown evangelicals who are Rapture Ready).

Is that the core conundrum facing humanity when it comes to global warming as the driver of catastrophic climate change? Is there ANY real world experience that would shift the "fear" of an ecological disaster on a global scale into a universal acknowledgment of the clear and present "danger"?