



carol@carolrossandassociates.com | www.carolrossandassociates.com | 303.666.0580

Close Calls

Life can be surreal, until you remember that you aren't a character in a movie, that the laws of physics do apply to you, that your human mind is part of a human body made of skin and bones and blood.

I was grocery shopping with my sons on a sunny fall-like Sunday afternoon. It was the weekend, my sons needed to get out of the house and away from the seduction of computer games and I needed fixings for dinner. The free samples of gourmet cheese and cookies were enough to entice them away from the screen for an hour. My younger son enjoyed pushing a kid-sized cart, while I pushed the regular cart. On the way out of the store, my son realized he needed to return his miniature cart. I waited the few seconds it took for him to walk back into the store.

As we neared our car, I heard a woman yelling "Someone forgot to put on their brake!" I saw a deep green Outback Subaru wagon, gently making its way across the parking lot, crossing in front of us, as if it were taking a leisurely stroll in an open field. The absence of any engine sound, and an empty driver seat only reinforced the idea that 3000 lbs of metal could have a mind of its own. All I could say was "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" As if God needed to be called in to see freak parking lot accidents for mild entertainment. My sons were stopped dead in their tracks, mouths open, waiting for the next episode of *The Car With a Mind of Its Own*.

The car was headed for the empty space to the right of my car, from a space that was across the aisle and a space or two over. It barely missed my car before it came to a stop, blocked by the bumper of a white Taurus station wagon. It was only slightly slanted in the parking space and resting against the car in front, the one it gently nudged before settling into the spot. If I hadn't seen the sequence of events unfold before my very eyes, I would have guessed that someone had done a decent enough job of parking the car and not given it a second glance. Apparently this was the case for those joining the scene 60 seconds later. Another car soon pulled in (with a human driver, this time) on the other side of the riderless wagon, oblivious to what had just happened.

And then it hit me. My son, in returning his kid-sized cart, had delayed us just long enough to be out of harm's way. Without that 30-second delay, we would have been standing in the spot next to our car, loading groceries on the front passenger seat, a live target for the Green Monster. I shivered at the lead headline on the local newspaper: "Woman Crushed By Runaway Car While Loading Up Groceries." It was not a pretty way to die.

Death is usually not so quirky and humorous. People die of cancer and plane crashes. They die in *real* automobile accidents, from lightning strikes, and in flash floods. Serious stuff. They don't die because someone forgot to put their parking brake on at the grocery store.

What did this all mean for me and my ordinary life? The life where I'm trying to decide whether to make pasta with crumbled blue cheese or mussels for dinner? The life where I'm pondering whether it's worth it to buy the red seedless grapes for 50 cents more a pound than the green version? It means not to delay on that bike ride with the kids before dinner. It means not to worry if I spend 20 dollars more a week on stuff we really want to eat vs. what's on sale that week. I have seen the gift of life and how easily it can be taken away.

I know now that unlike what my kids get conditioned to believe in computer games, life is fragile, without any notice that the end is near. I am made of skin and bones and blood. Speeding along the highway inside the heft of a Volvo, I forget that I am just passing through on this planet and that the ride could end at any time. Even in the safety of a parking lot on a Sunday afternoon. Close calls and freak accidents are meant to open our eyes to what we have and what we can so easily lose. Pay attention.

Copyright © 2003-2006 by Carol Ross and Associates, LLC, www.carolrossandassociates.com. Contact carol@carolrossandassociates.com for reprint permission. If you enjoyed this article, visit Carol's blog, www.blog.carolrossandassociates.com, and podcasts, www.liveactioncoaching.com and www.leadingwithawholenewmind.com. Carol is an executive coach, organization development consultant, and writer. A former Bell Labs engineer, her clients are intelligent, analytical professionals who are ready to be more creative and energized in their work and life. While her degrees in engineering from Northwestern University have served her well, it's been her life and work experiences that have moved her to do her best work. She is certified by The Coaches Training Institute and credentialed by the International Coach Federation.