

CANADA: A Nation Not Risk Taking

By Simon Priest

Risk has been clearly defined as the potential to lose something of value (Priest & Baillie, 1987; Priest & Gass, 2018). That loss can manifest as harm: physical (broken bones), mental (embarrassment), social (publicly shared secrets) or financial (monetary decline). The word comes from the ancient Greek terms: rhizikon and rhiza (Sandoval, 2016). These were used to describe a navigation “difficulty to avoid at sea” such as exposed rocks, roots, reefs, anything cut from the land, and sea monsters (Skyjong, 2005).

Perhaps the two of the most famous sea monsters in Greek mythology were Scylla and Charybdis from the *Odyssey* poem by Homer (Johnson, 2019). Scylla was a submerged shoal with six exposed heads, while Charybdis was a whirlpool. These two risks lay on either side of the narrow Strait of Messina between Calabria and Sicily. Sailing between them during a storm was the challenge of every navigator and losing a few sailors to Scylla was thought to be better than losing the whole ship to Charybdis. This is where the modern sayings “between a rock and a hard spot” and “the lesser of two evils” come from.

Regarding risk, Canadian society is facing our own Scylla and Charybdis. However, in an attempt to avoid one, we are falling victim to the other. Before considering our risky dilemma, we must reflect on recent risk-related events taken from outdoor-oriented school field trips.

In the summer of 1978, 27 students (ages ranging from 12 to 14) and four “Masters” from a religious school in Ontario were paddling on Lac Timiskaming, on the boundary of Quebec and Ontario. Four modified and heavily laden canoes capsized in high winds and everyone ended up spending 12 hours in 4°C water. Twelve students and one instructor succumbed to hypothermia, while 15 students and three instructors survived

the ordeal to be rescued by helicopter. The school was criticized for its grueling “macho” philosophy and record of near-misses from past trips. The accident caused a re-examination of youth canoe tripping guidelines and brought an eventual financial closure to the school (Raffan, 2002).

In winter of 2003, seven 10th grade teenagers were killed by a massive snow avalanche in Glacier Park, British Columbia, while on a field trip from an Albertan private school. Even with taking the appropriate precautions, the group of 14 was overwhelmed by the enormity of the avalanche that swept down from the mountains, across the open valley, and up the other side to the slope where the school group was skiing (Doty, 2013). After review, the valley was reclassified by the National Parks as unsuitable for school groups and the school trips carried on with more stringent safety procedures (Cloutier, 2003).

In the summer of 2017, a 15-year-old non-swimmer drowned while in the water without a PFD or adult supervision, while on a high school field trip in Algonquin Park, Ontario. The tragedy of this death notwithstanding, the teacher in charge of the excursion was charged with criminal negligence. Field trips were drastically re-evaluated and those with any risks were heavily restricted (Henderson, 2020).

In the summer of 2019, a 14-year-old student drowned while swimming with about 20 others in the Assomption River near Saint Come, Quebec, on a school field trip (Canadian Press, 2019). That same month, a 13-year-old was killed by a falling tree, displaced during 80 km/hr winds, in Sooke, British Columbia (Weichel & Scott, 2019). Programmatic consequences were undecided at the time of writing.

Some of these heartbreaking losses of life led to greater constraints. Many field

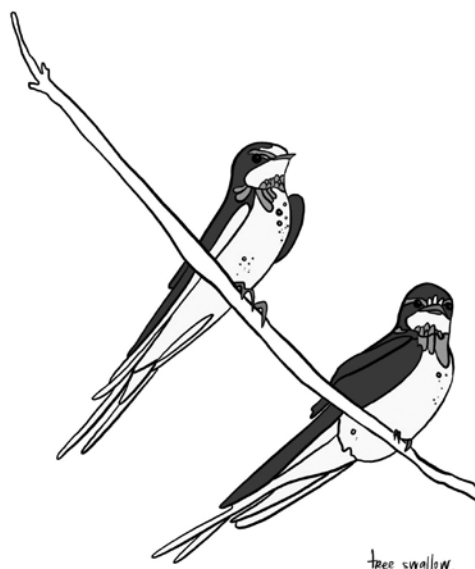
trips were canceled all together, while others were so severely controlled that the element of adventure disappeared. This pattern is repeating in Canadian wilderness camping (Callan, 2018), Ontario canoe tripping (Henderson & Howard, 2018), Quebec nature tourism (Grenier, 2020), and BC outdoor play (Brussoni, 2021). While this might seem like appropriate avoidance of risks (Scylla), it represents another concern (Charybdis).

Canada is becoming more like the United States every day. Our society is experiencing increased gang violence (Public Safety Canada, 2018), decreased physical and mental health (Varin, Palladino, Lary & Baker, 2020), and increased sedentary time spent watching a screen (Prince, Roberts, Melvin, Butler & Thompson, 2020). Similarly, we are trending like Americans in terms of our on-demand consumer behaviors and immediate desire for digital conveniences (BDC, 2021).

One area where we are fast catching up to our southern neighbours is through increased litigation and rapidly enlarging numbers of lawyers (Olson, 1997; Levin & Alkoby, 2021). Another is the climbing costs of insurance due to swollen claims from natural disasters caused by climate collapse and other issues (Aligned Insurance, 2021). Patterns of litigation lead directly to new legislation, indirectly to regulation, and impact insurance markets in most industries (Viscusi, 2002). So we can reasonably assume that the public risk anxiety is partly driven by a growing legal profession and partly by rising insurance premiums.

Either way, Canadians are simply becoming risk averse (RSA, 2010). For example, we are already known for being risk-averse in business (Carmichael, 2021), technology (Anjos, 2021), innovation (digital, 2014), and research and development (Naylor, 2017). Eventually, we will be unable to take risks in daily living.

Until then, some citizens pursue risk in

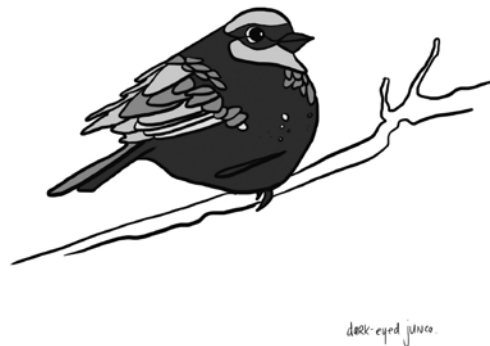


their leisure time by gambling, investing/trading, car racing, jet boating, and roller coaster riding. One subset of this is adventurous leisure. We are all no doubt familiar with adventure tourism experiences such as commercial bungee jumping, guided mountain climbing, and outfitted wildlife watching. Until COVID-19, this industry was growing 60% annually in Canada (EhCanada, 2019), where we have an abundance of pristine wilderness and outdoor beauty. Furthermore, adventure tourism and outdoor travel are expected to be the fastest recovering tourism after COVID-19 (Borko, Geerts & Wang, 2020). So, why the great interest in leisure-based risk taking?

Research suggests that individuals living in functional situations are seeking the brief exposure to fear and thrills that come from a perception of maximum risk, while in reality, actual risks are minimized (Cater, 2006). However, people living under dysfunctional circumstances are likely to seek escape or pain relief through substance abuse, crime, gang affiliation, suicide, unsafe sex, and toxic relationships that they interpret as equivalent forms of risk taking (Osgood, Foster & Courtney, 2010). Both needs may be partly attributed to experiencing a childhood without sufficient risky play (Little & Wyver, 2008).

Some researchers believe that children not

taking risks early in their lives become at-risk adolescents later on. A lack of risky play has detrimental impacts on self-esteem, confidence, and problem solving abilities (Gill, 2007), diminishes the development of optimal health and fitness (Greenfield, 2004), and drastically restricts motor development (Waters & Begley, 2007). Nevertheless, today's society has high anxiety toward risky play and so children's play is restricted in the name of safety (Stephenson, 2003). Essentially, too much risk and we endanger our offspring, too little and they grow up unprepared for life.



To grow up without risk is to risk not growing up (Druckerman, 2012). Risk taking is a very necessary element of normal human development that helps build required personal resilience against adversity (Rutter, 2001). Risk taking teaches children how to fit in and that they can be competent, capable, confident, and conscientious: requirements for transitioning into adulthood (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2014). Children must be able to take sensible risks to develop sound judgment and learn their reasonable limits. To deny them this opportunity means to prevent the gain of a clear "Risk-taker's Advantage" that asserts independence and learns directly from natural consequences (Ungar, 2010).

So parents must gain the ability to balance their children's safety and psychosocial growth. However, nowadays, too many parents are overprotective, partly from a fear of being accused of criminal neglect (Pimental, 2012) and partly from their own aversion to risks (Ungar, 2010). While they are correctly motivated by love, their efforts

are misguided and likely to do more harm than foster growth.

Recently, researchers called for a return to risky play for children (ages 3-12 years). In particular, their evidence-informed position statement reads: "Access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks—is essential for healthy child development. We recommend increasing children's opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings—at home, at school, in child care, the community and nature." (Tremblay, Gray, Babcock, Barnes, Bradstreet, Carr, Chabot, Choquette, Chorney, Collyer, Herrington, Janson, Janssen, Larouche, Pickett, Power, Sandseter, Simon & Brussoni, 2015, p.6475).

By depriving children of risks, in order to keep them safe and without injury (Scylla), we are harming their ongoing development as adolescents (Charybdis). Subjected to bullying, unrealistic images on social media, and abuse or neglect, youth are unable to cope and turn to dysfunctional risk taking such as drugs, crime, or suicide. When they find themselves in these circumstances and mainstream therapy has failed them, they are often prescribed risk taking forms of therapy: adventure and wilderness.

Adventure therapy can be defined as the prescriptive use of challenge experiences by mental health professionals, conducted in natural settings that kinesthetically engage clients on cognitive, affective and behavioral levels (Gass, Gillis & Russell, 2020). Wilderness therapy is a subset of adventure, where the challenges take place in remote and wild locations away from urban life and the rush of civilization.

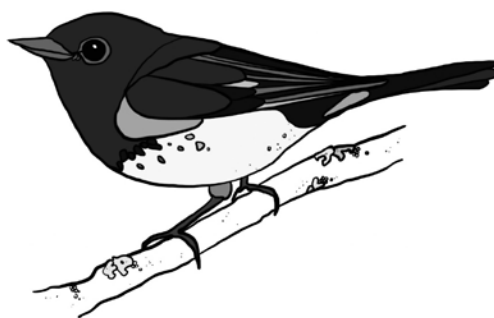
Unlike the school trips described at the start of this writing, the best therapy programs are run by professionals: competent outdoor leaders or qualified facilitators working alongside licensed mental health clinicians or graduate trained therapists. Expectedly, these programs tend to be expensive. Do not be swayed by the pretender program that only delivers the activity without the learning and change.

Such outdoor therapeutic programs deliver treatments that develop coping strategies, resolve trauma, transform behavior, and reduce resistance to change by combining experiential learning methods and healing and restorative interventions with adventures in nature, wilderness and other environments. Elements contributing to their mechanism of change include: countering situational risk with personal competence, working together in small groups, immersing in nature, engaging with therapy, facilitating discussion, continuing support, and connecting by metaphor. Clients directly benefit by improving their health: physical, emotional, mental, cognitive, behavioral, social, and spiritual well-being.

So, in summary, if we take all the risks out of growing up, then children are stifled and ill equipped to deal with the risks of adolescence. On the one hand, we want our children to be safe, so we protect them and sometimes over-protect them, in order to avoid harm (Scylla). However, overdoing this protection can lead to poorly prepared citizens who don't understand real dangers, crave artificial risks, and adopt destructive behaviors later in life (Charybdis). To counter both, we must navigate a prudent route between too much safety and too little risk. If we can't chart a careful course and don't strike a steady balance, we may avoid the rocks, but we will surely be sucked down into the massive whirlpool of troubled youth in desperate need of therapy. Only time will tell how well we steer through the strait.

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Ruby-throated hummingbird.