Risk Wise

Nine everyday adventures

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Introduction

The original plan was to open this book with a bold utopian vision of a world without risk, a carefree El Dorado where nothing that we hold dear is suffered to hang in any kind of infernal balance, but instead is suspended in a bubble of immaculate and infinite safety. The transported reader would be reminded of the finer sort of science fiction or perhaps one of those elegant thought experiments beloved of late twentieth-century bluestockings. The graceful conceit would then set the stage for a timely and orderly meditation upon risk in the modern world.

It would have been great, if only it had worked.

But instead the utopia quickly turned into dystopia and from there into chaos – not, one hopes, because of the ineptitude of the writer, but because of the sheer impossibility of removing the notion of risk from any imaginable form of human life. Please, feel free, try it yourselves and good luck, but do not expect a smooth ride.

For quite apart from the troublesome business of mortality, which – you have been warned – is a serious obstacle for anyone foolhardy enough to hallucinate a risk-free existence, there also remains the sticky issue of how fundamental risk is to our

temporal day-to-day lives. It is because we do not know what is going to happen and we mind about what does that the notion of risk exists at all.

Yet something strange has happened to it in recent years. So cosseted from many sorts of danger have we in the developed world become that we have rather lost our bottle; or at least we think we have, which in itself can be curiously self-fulfilling. We hark back to an age when the sorrows and misfortunes of earlier generations were simply absorbed by doughty folk hardened to disaster and disappointment. And our nostalgia for their bygone resilience, although we in part invented it to fit our story, means that we tend not to see their travails and their triumphs through the prism of risk. No, rather in the way that teenagers with spots and broken hearts feel that their anguish surpasses any prior heartache, so we in the modern world feel that we *own* risk somehow, that our experience of it is uniquely intense. Moreover, because our secular society has replaced divine ordinance with a cult of individual control, we read our whole lives through a balance sheet of risks and safeguards, so that when anything goes wrong, as it inevitably does, we reflexively hunt for the person who should have seen it coming all along (this is called the hindsight bias, more of which later on).

The crux is this: in one sense the urge towards safety can be, and is, good; but if left unchecked, it fosters a delusional zeal to stamp out every last pernicious risk where'er it lurks, fudging the neutral idea of uncertainty with the negative one of hazard. Indeed, your thesaurus will tell you that

'hazard' and 'risk' are one and the same, but do not be fooled; they are not. And, if this book sets out to do one thing, it is to disabuse you of that.

What if we were to look beyond an idea of risk conjured alone by TV images of planes hitting skyscrapers, bankers slumped on desks as stocks flat-line or of lone polar bears teetering on shrinking icebergs? What if we were to entertain the thought that sometimes risk can be good? Whisper it, for in your heart you already know that we each of us take a thousand large or small risks every day. When you cross the road, get on the train, climb a hill, hurry downstairs, voice an opinion, tell a white lie, butter some toast, drink a beer, say a prayer, take a holiday, take a job, lean in for a kiss, slam a door in rage, buy a house, buy a book, say goodbye, say hello, each of these acts contains a few essential particles of risk. And could the time have finally come to celebrate the fact?

Peruse, with an eye to risk, the corpus of ancient Greek ethics and you quickly realise much of it is given over to contemplation of the essential ingredients of risk: how much of human life depends upon things, both good and bad, that humans cannot control and how the good man (or woman) can reasonably be expected to navigate the fact. Aristotle in particular spent a lifetime teasing out ideas of a good life that is only meaningful as pursued in a world where it is not necessarily handed to you on a plate. Indeed, the heart of his ethics turns on the idea of the 'Golden Mean'; that the virtues live in some state of equilibrium with their concomitant vices, so courage sits at the halfway point between rashness and cowardice, generosity between extravagance and meanness, modesty between shyness and shamelessness and so on.

Risk was not isolated for this treatment, of course. Aristotle was a millennium and a half too early for that – and besides it is not a virtue – but this book proposes that we nevertheless borrow the philosopher's model. Given that a world without risk is unthinkable and that hyper-caution may prove as undesirable, and as hazardous, as mindless thrill-seeking, consider this: where with regard to risk might the Golden Mean lie? Where is the Risk Wise sweet spot?

The point is that there are evidently people out there who know, or who have learned, how to live with risk in intelligent, enriching ways; there are people out there who are risk wise. This is their book. It is about what they feel and how they think.

And whether indeed the rest of us might learn to be risk wise too. In the words of intelligent risk-takers everywhere, *why not?*

1

Playing with fire

A small girl is hammering a four-inch nail into a plank of wood. She wears a pink sundress and black school shoes without socks. She is concentrating intensely, hammering hard. The steel shaft of the nail is gripped between grubby finger and thumb, the plank itself balanced precariously against a short section of concrete sewer pipe, on which someone has spray-painted a few squiggles. One swing of the hammer, a rubber-handled DIY-store affair, glances off the side of the little girl's thumb. She pulls a face and squeezes the thumb into her palm for a moment. Then she resumes pounding away until a tiny curlicue of wood appears on the other side of the plank, chased by the shiny point of the nail.

'I'm making something,' she says, without looking up, and grabs a rusty-looking saw from the ground by her feet.

Passing a charred fire-pit where some kids lit a blaze the day before, two cousins scramble to the summit of a great, honeycombed heap of wooden pallets. They take it in turns to leap off the highest point onto the fibreglass prow of an old boat beneath. Airborne, they pedal the sunshine for a

few seconds before landing with a whoop and a sound like a distant explosion.

'It makes you bounce,' yells one to the other.

It does not look safe, this boat crash pad, but it does look fun. So much fun, in fact, you find yourself wondering whether they might let you have a go.

Not far away is a trickle of a stream, full of what appears to be rubbish – more tyres, a single red shoe, an industrial cable spool, some grey upholstery foam and an old metal school chair with no seat. The stream is flanked by tall trees, where a girl and a boy are climbing in their bare feet.

'Does Mum know I'm out?' one of them asks the other.

'I don't know,' comes the reply, and they keep climbing.

* * *

This pied piper of a junkyard can be found tucked away down an alley behind a drab community building in the centre of Plas Madoc, a housing estate south of Wrexham in North Wales. Plas Madoc is in the top 10 per cent of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation. It is not for nothing that people round here call it Smack Madoc or Cardboard City. Ever since the estate was built in the sixties, local children have played on this acre or so of wasteland, carved in two by a brook that dwindles in summer, gushes in winter. Though it is little more than a puddle on this hot summer's day, there were stories years ago that a child had drowned in it, long before the estate was built. Locals here

recollect their mothers saying to them as children, 'You've not been down at the brook, have you?', to which they would shake their heads – lying – 'No, absolutely not.'

But the children of Plas Madoc loved this scraggy plot of nothingness between houses. It was their space, their 'room of one's own'. They called it simply The Land. No one round here can ever remember it being called anything else.

In recent years, this kind of play – free, unsupervised, prone to scrapes and bumps, sometimes unkind, often daft and almost always dirty – has been deemed to be in crisis. A generation of children, so we are told, has been marooned indoors, kept there by the conspiring forces of institutional risk aversion, fractured, fearful parenting and the decline of social cohesion. Well-worn admonishments – of the perils of taking your eye off your kids for more than a heartbeat, the obsession

with stranger danger, the terror of accidents, the carping about antisocial behaviour – these much-publicised fears are now matched by equally dire warnings from think tanks and psychologists of the toll of 'play deprivation'. As one eminent play theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith, puts it, 'the opposite of play is not work. It's depression.' At the most basic evolutionary level, he argues, our emotional survival is at stake. If excessive caution denies children the time, space and permission to play – *really play*, without some grown-up breathing down their neck – then in the future we will count the social cost in isolated, dysfunctional, angry or even violent adults. The time will come, indeed, when we may wish that we had occasionally judged it better to be sorry than safe.

In 2012, even the Health and Safety folk joined the chorus with a statement in which they maintained, 'When providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool.'

Here in Wales, the Assembly government came up with what they called a Play Sufficiency Duty, which despite its somewhat cheerless title pledged to secure opportunities for all children to horse about in the way that children do, or at least they should. In the case of Plas Madoc, a portion of anti-poverty funding was diverted towards play initiatives. And for The Land – which had declined into a grim place where, in the words of one local, 'people got up to bad stuff' – it was to mean a whole new sovereign life.

In October 2011, a fence went up around the plot. The boundary was tagged with jolly graffiti and a team of play workers recruited. Gone was the dog mess, broken glass and the needles, and a miscellany of friendlier garbage was shipped in. Someone fetched hammers and saws from a pound store and two shipping containers were dropped in by crane to be a storeroom and an office for the playground manager. The following February, The Land became Plas Madoc's very own junk playground: not a swing or climbing frame to be seen, nothing fixed, nothing new, nothing in the shape of a cute animal, just heaps of junk that shift, as the days pass, like sand dunes in the Sahara.

Plas Madoc born and bred, Claire Griffiths is the manager of The Land and in large part the architect of its joyful chaos. She sits, swinging slightly as if she would rather be outside playing, on a shabby office chair in the shipping container that