

Adventure, Niagara Falls and "crazy" Doug Ammons

I think it's likely all kayakers have been told at some point that they are crazy. It doesn't matter if you paddle on lakes and easy rivers, or over waterfalls and difficult whitewater. Somebody along the way will say you stepped over the bounds of good sense, and are nuts or have a death wish.

What people consider insane is a question of their comfort zone and whether they are willing to step out of it. To do an adventure sport, you have to enjoy stepping up to the limits of your experience and looking over the edge, hopefully carefully enough that you don't go too far before you realize it. Everybody has different appetites for newness and weighs consequences differently, so there's no magic edge that everybody agrees on. In the end, you can convince yourself that something is actually quite do-able and even fun while it sounds perfectly insane to others. It's worth remembering too, that no matter how well you think you have a new stunt figured out, things don't necessarily turn out the way you expect.

In any case, the next time somebody calls you the "C" word and shakes his head, have some ammunition ready. Here are some counterexamples of certifiable nut cases to trot out, and in comparison to them, even the wildest kayaker will look conservative. We're sane, I swear!

The history of Niagara Falls is about as colorful as anyplace in whitewater annals, and many of the best stories come from it. You get your loonies and the occasional fruitcake who actually has a bead on the truth. All of them, for one reason or another, gravitate toward spectacular places like the Falls.

The escarpment that makes the falls is a beautiful dark basalt layer about 180 feet tall. The river runs strong and wide there, plummeting over the edge in a massive cataract that has inspired people for hundreds of years.

If the falls are big, the dreams of some people are even bigger. There are the legendary stories, most of them true, of the guy or gal in a wooden barrel washing over the edge and disappearing into the frothing base of the plunge pool. Most have been killed, but a surprising number of them have actually made it - which is amazing if you consider the hazards of falling 180 feet - that's 18 stories - and having thousands of tons of water piling down on top of you, yet having faith that your body will survive the pummeling and the barrel that you are in will carry you to safety.

There have been broken wrists and legs, concussions, bruising, and a great many people have washed out dead. Others had their barrels smashed and their bodies were never found. When you stand there and look at that mighty waterfall, the question naturally arises: what on earth could they have been thinking? It sounds like the proverbial suicidal stunt. How could you really think that you could do this sort of thing

and live?

Anybody who has ever jumped off a 50 or 60 foot bridge into the water knows that you hit really hard. You can get your shoes blown off, or your feet badly bruised, even when you hit right. If you hit wrong, you'll pay dearly for it. For the excitable or those with a screw or two loose, it's fun, but after a couple of times I guarantee you start thinking seriously about the sanity of the thing. Professional high divers sometimes dive from over a hundred feet and more. And once, a friend of mine from high school by the name of Shawn jumped off a cliff that turned out to be almost 200 feet high. It was an impulsive jump into a cool and invitingly deep pool, but he hadn't really intended on doing something so - well, crazy. His pal, whose name was Jet, tried to stop him, but Shawn had jumped off of every sort of bridge and cliff into rivers and lakes, he was a gymnast, rock climber and kayaker, and probably missed his calling as a stuntman for James Bond films. In any case, he had a good claim to knowing what he was doing. "I was clear as a bell before I jumped," he told me years later. "I knew I could make it."

He was off and flying before he questioned himself, rapidly shrinking to ant-like size as Jet watched in horror. He finally hit - perfectly - but surfaced face down doing the dead man's float. By the time Jet was able to climb down to the pool, Shawn had dragged himself out of the water and was staggering down the trail, white as a sheet and bleeding from both ears and his nose. However, Shawn then proved himself totally sane by asking three simple questions.

"Where am I?"

"You're in Hawaii," replied Jet.

"Do I have any money?" asked Shawn.

"Yes you have money," replied Jet.

And after a few seconds thinking these answers over, Shawn asked a critical question that separates the sane from the insane: "Why did I jump?"

"I don't know," Jet said, "but let's get to a hospital quick."

I'd like to point out that clearly Shawn was fully rational even in his badly concussed state. He wasn't mentally unbalanced, he just made an impulsive decision. Fortunately he was one tough guy.

The hospital scene that followed is also informative about the separation between your normal decision that turns out badly, and full-bore craziness. Jet sat in the emergency room for some time as the doctor looked over Shawn. Finally, the doctor emerged with a grave look on his face.

"Is he okay?" asked Jet.

"Yes," said the doctor, "but I'd like to ask you a question." He looked thoughtfully at Jet for a few moments, then leaned forward and asked in a low voice, "Does your friend have any ... psychiatric problems?"

Taken aback, Jet answered, "No, none at all."

"He hasn't indicated any wish to, uh, kill himself?"

Shocked, Jet blurted out, "God no, we just didn't think the cliff was so high."

Well, it turned out that the falls Shawn had jumped off of was regularly used by suicidal people and quite a number had been blown by the wind directly into the cliff as they fell. It had been a calm day when Shawn jumped. He landed perfectly and survived. He is a happy and successful businessman to this very day. Chalk it up as a bad decision, teetering on the verge of folly or madness, but with the important difference that he survived it.

So let us get back to Niagara Falls and those who decided it was a perfectly sane thing to float over. You have to tip your hats to those who took the plunge and came out alive at the bottom. Impulsively jumping into a barrel and flying over the edge of the falls, a la Shawn's jump, is maybe an understandable decision for a strong, adventuresome young man or woman. But meticulously planning a feat that turns out to be one's final exit from this life is either very dumb, or nuts.

Maybe it's the natural bent most of us have toward the macabre - the spectacle of weirdness and certain horrific ends, but when you get right down to it the failures at Niagara are what are most impressive. A miraculous success may inspire our wonder, but a disastrous and spectacular failure is where the action is. So here are a few of those "almost-made-it" runs that separate us from the true eccentric nutsos. These guys are beyond the pale, smack dab in the middle of weirdness, and in a word - crazy.

The physics of falling 180 feet is pretty simple, you learn it in a first physics course. The basics are summed up in two simple equations. For the less mathematically minded, what these equations amount to is that the farther you fall, the faster you go until you reach terminal velocity. There, at about 120 miles per hour, the air resistance slowing you down exactly offsets the acceleration from gravity speeding you up.

When you fall 180 feet you don't quite make it to terminal velocity, but you are tootling along faster than grandma's old Ford does - about 70 mph at the bottom. When you're in a river, you also are falling with all that water at your back, and when a gallon of water falls 180 feet it hits with something like the crack of a big masonry brick heaved off an 18 story building. The water may not be quite as hard, but in a river there's a lot of it. The Niagara River has 50,000 to 100,000 cubic feet a second pounding over the falls, and each cubic foot of water weighs in at about 40 pounds. That's three million pounds per second, or about 1500 tons coming down and hitting the bottom at 70 miles per hour. It's hard to fathom that power. Imagine 50,000 sacks of Eco-Compost raining down on your

head every second, a bulldozer falling on top of you with every tick of the clock, or a cement parking garage collapsing every 20 seconds.

Our heroes are not daunted by such thoughts. In fact, they are convinced that they know exactly what to do about the hazards. So one sign of the touched is that they never dwell on the negative. It either never occurs to them, or maybe they deny it outright, but more likely, they think they have figured some way to finagle around the problems. Confidence is theirs; they are right and do not fear. And that is how they so blithely and confidently cross the divide to meet their undoing.

A number of people have gone off the falls in wooden barrels. Elvin XX was the first, and was grappled out of the frothing waters below the falls by a boatman, having suffered a broken arm and ribs. Others followed, some successful and many not. One guy, Josuha Williams, thought he had it iced. He reckoned that the main problems were having the barrel get broken by the impact and then drowning, or else being pummeled under in the backwash and running out of air before you could surface. So, he planned and thought and finally constructed a bombproof steel container weighing nearly a ton that would withstand the huge force of the falls. He heavily padded the inside - no broken barrel and no broken bones for him. To top it off, he solved the problem of being held under water by installing several tanks of compressed air in the capsule. A six hour air supply should be plenty, he thought.

The fateful day came. Full of confidence, he had himself sealed in the capsule and was pushed into the river above the falls. Over he went as the onlookers shuttered and some cheered. His metal craft disappeared at the bottom and ... didn't come up. Well, no matter. After all, he had that six-hour air supply.

Four days later his capsule appeared, bobbing in the swirling waters below the falls. They opened it and there he was. Not a broken bone. All his limbs were intact, he had easily survived the fall. As the clock ticked past six hours with him pinned to the bottom in his one-ton capsule, he had had plenty of time to contemplate the one critical error in his calculations.

Another guy had it all figured out too. His solution to the padding was to rig up an elastic harness that fit under his arms and around his waist and feet. Suspended within his specially built barrel, he would be impervious to broken limbs. Mindful of the hazards of heavy steel capsules, he wanted a light but strong wooden barrel that would easily float. He also had another idea to avoid tumbling out of control. After falling 180 feet, it's much better to land upright on one's feet, as it were, and minimize the force. Hitting sideways could easily destroy the barrel and also beat you against the side, breaking your bones or killing you, as happened to so many intrepid Niagara barrelers. So, for these and perhaps other reasons he thought it was better to stay upright, and for that he needed ballast in the bottom of the barrel. There's lots of ways to have ballast, you can load the bottom with rocks or lead or you could do what he did, which was to strap an anvil to his feet.

He was sealed into his barrel and went over the edge, certain of his plan's success. The barrel fell straight and true, 180 feet to the roiling water below. It quickly came out of the backwash and was found shortly afterwards. The bottom was blown out. When curious rescuers peered inside the remaining shell all they found were two arms, secured into the harness. Neither the anvil or the armless body were ever recovered.

And barrelers don't have a lock on the best attempts. In 1985, as reported by the Darwin Awards committee, a daredevil named Robert constructed a homemade rocket-parachute contraption and rode a jet ski over the falls at full throttle. He planned to ignite the rocket to shoot him away from the falls, then open the parachute. He envisioned himself landing softly in the river below, raising his hands in triumph before the astonished tourists as he was fished out by the Maid o' the Mist tour boat. It was an awesome plan and almost everything worked. He shot down the little rapids above the falls at breakneck speed, chattering along over the waves working hard to keep the jetski on course. Just imagine the noise and excitement as you roar along! You're totally committed and every nerve tingles, adreneline shoots through your body. You've never felt more alert! You crank the throttle wide open and the power of the engine drives you toward the yawning chasm! The edge looms closer and closer - *this is it* - until you shoot off the falls and fly through space toward the horizon, gravity suddenly suspended below you as the jetski falls behind. However, reaching back to ignite the rocket, Robert found it wet. It failed to ignite and his parachute didn't deploy. The tourists were very impressed. Bystanders said his body was recovered from the river below by the Maid o' the Mist staff. Wow.

Craziness comes in degrees. For the sake of perspective though, it's helpful to compare the sane things we kayakers do to the crazy things people do who really are out of it. We can rest easy, assured that we're not like them. After all, we've got it all figured out, don't we?