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Newsletter / September 2007

Troubled Bridge Over Mississippi Water

By Jim Stavis

On August 1st, the country was shocked to learn about another concern now facing us; are our bridges safe to drive on? In Minneapolis, Minnesota the I-35 Bridge that connects the Twin Cities over the Mississippi River unexplainably collapsed and sent scores of unsuspecting commuters into the river. Remarkably a small number (thirteen as of this writing) were found dead, with many more injured.

(Continued Inside)



QUOTE of the MONTH

“Have the courage to change what we can change –

The serenity to accept what we can't change, And the wisdom to know the difference.”

- The Alcoholics Anonymous, Serenity Prayer

TROUBLED BRIDGE OVER MISSISSIPPI WATER

(Continued from Front)

The bridge was constructed in 1967 and its design is one that is common among the nation's bridges. It was a steel and truss design that carried 140,000 vehicles a day. The bridge was designated as structurally deficient in 1990, but that did not mean it was unsafe to drive on. According to the Department of Transportation, there are 13,000 such bridges across the country that have this deficient designation (about 13 percent of all bridges), which require repairs, more intense inspections and monitoring.

So what went wrong? A specific cause will not be known for years. Like an airplane crash, it takes investigators quite some time to sort through the wreckage to learn what might have taken place. The initial indication is that there was a failure of the bridge bearings which are used to transfer loads from the deck to the superstructure (bridge) as weight burdens vary or weather conditions change. There was evidence of corrosion on these bearings going back 17 years, but it did not necessitate replacement of the bridge.

This incident will spark legislation to fund the country's aging infrastructure and the inspection of the thousands of bridges and

highways across the country. It will also create the need for an improved design of bridges, one that may have a greater emphasis on the use of polymeric materials versus steel.

A MATTER OF LUCK

To say life is unpredictable would be quite an understatement. As the above article demonstrates, the idea of a bridge collapsing at the precise moment that you're driving on it might indicate that you're an unlucky person. Or, for the 2,752 people who went to work in New York on September 11th, 2001 and lost their lives due to a terrorist act, they would be deemed unlucky. But how can we explain the phenomenon of being at the wrong place at the wrong time or conversely being in the right place at the right time? Even with the greatest

foresight some events are simply uncontrolled and unanticipated.

People, however, are bothered by the idea that bad things can just happen for no reason. That can lead to fatalism (things are meant to be) and can become an excuse not to take any risks or responsibility for events in their lives. Many religions take the view that whatever happens is God's will, so it is pointless to try and change anything. For those that died on 9/11, it was their fate.

The only rational approach for a secular humanist may be to decide to be irrationally optimistic. We must make the

optimistic assumption that things usually work out for the best, and that even unanticipated problems will usually be solved. By taking this approach, we will be best prepared to handle random problems and take advantage of coincidences. Of course, sometimes we'll be wrong. Disasters and deaths do occur, but they happen no matter what our state of mind is. By choosing to be optimistic, we will be better prepared to deal with the consequences.

