



## The Race to Nowhere...fast.

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I am not exactly sure of where my angst comes from but I am full of it lately. I ran a box alarm the other day where the only people who where they should have been were the first engine and the first truck. Everyone else was simply in the wrong spot. I was furious.

There was once a time when I too was 21 years old and someone let me behind the wheels of an impressively huge fire engine with an impressively huge motor. I learned via watching that there were only two positions for the accelerator, "full on" and "full off." I learned that that the sole objective of any response was to get to the run first, stretch the line faster than the next guy and in essence "punk somebody." I read the book Probies Days by Jerry Engles and while my company was certainly not the same as his I saw similarities, I saw some of the same cultural values, it was simply fast and hard and ruthless.

Back when I was 4<sup>th</sup> due and first arriving I laughed so hard I could cry. I would call the companies I beat and harass them. I was not popular. (And some may argue that I am still not) Now when I see those same behaviors I cringe. I cringe when I see a fire engine racing down the highway. I cringe when I see the 4<sup>th</sup> engine sitting in the second engine's spot. I cringe when I hear people lie about where they are so that they can go on a run. Go do a web search for fire department videos and you will be surprised how some people continue to drive, even after the recent deaths from collisions with fire engines.

Why do I feel this way I wonder? Is it because I am simply older, slower, and tired, that I want order because I can no longer compete with the 20 year old I once was? Or is it that over these past 15 years I have visited too many of my friends in the hospital, personal friends, burned up, tubes down their throats because their airways were swelling shut. Perhaps it is because of the girl I know who still wears long sleeves in the summertime, unwilling to show the scars, or the guy I know who can't taste his food because he fell off the roof and lost his ability to taste. I look at the people who have crashed and ruined their backs and others who can't bend their knees. Perhaps it is those people; the memory of what happened to them and the knowledge that even though we accept risk and embrace it, we did not have to scar those people.

There might be another reason. It might be the times the fire had me pressed to the floor, the times in dark smoky rooms I wondered if the end was near. It was hearing people, real people who walked just like me and got dressed one pant's leg at a time, hearing them describe giving up in a burning room, prepared to die. Maybe that was enough, despite the age, to slow down, to take a more calculated look at what I was about to do.

If you are to die in the line of duty let it be because there was no other choice. Don't let your mother go through that mess, the closed casket, the mangled body underneath still reeking of soot, because you bought into some false notion of heroism, or because it made you feel better to get there first.

The reason so many people are predicting a line of duty death in the DC Metro region is because there has not been one in the suburbs for a long time. The risks are not personal and not tangible. We assign that possibility of dying to some "other." And I feel that close calls survived reinforce bad behaviors and don't correct them. Kenny Hendricks died before I started 15 years ago. Most of his contemporaries have left and have taken their lessons with them. All the faces are new. Most departments in this area are full of new people, people who do not know the names and faces of the dead and injured. The failure of the fire service is that we let those narratives retire with the victims. Recruits should see on their very first day graphic photos of what happens to human bodies when they are exposed to the heat of flashover. They should watch NIST FDS simulations of how fast those poor souls in Keouk, Iowa were overcome with a superheated movement of fire gases, they should see the pictures of fire engines lying in ditches, and hear from the men and women with missing limbs, just how important that box alarm for food on the stove was.

I am still about going quickly. I want to get out the door as fast as possible; my job is still predicated on speed. However, it is not predicated on driving down the road at mach 10 in heavy traffic past an elementary school that is just letting out. It is not predicated on taking the wrong side of the road for an alarm activation, and it is not predicated on beating you to your spot.

I have been afraid before and am not afraid to admit it. **I HAVE BEEN AFRAID BEFORE.** I will continue to be afraid. Every time I climb into the front of a fire engine, every time I say that I have the command of an incident I feel the full weight of that responsibility. I know that it only takes a few seconds for a simple fire to end up with bagpipes and Amazing Grace being played in a graveyard under the careful watch of a huge flag. I don't want that for me. I want to walk away from this under my own power with the majority of my body still intact, and have some time to do the things I have been dreaming about for the last few years. I can't do this if the entire team is not on board with the program.

Unfortunately I was a racer, I was racing anyone who I could find, and the sad thing is that it took me all these years to realize that the only real race there every

was, the only race that ever mattered was with myself, and that by racing others I lost every time.

We all have a job to do, and the least part of that job is putting the fire out. The greater part of it all is knowing that because you did exactly what you were supposed to do, and knowing that because you were there someone else did not have to be at the burn center getting his/her burns scrubbed.

The message is that if you beat me we both know you beat me, RAH RAH, now take your assigned position and complete your assigned tasks, so that we can all go home and so that you can still be alive to gloat. **I still hate to get beat** it, it still makes me angry beyond belief, I still find satisfaction in beating you, and I simply cannot help that. But I have made some changes. If I am supposed to pick up your line and I beat you to the scene, look for me at your hydrant.