UNCOMMON COMMON SENSE

By Bill Frayer

Mis-Estimation of Risk

Many of your friends and relatives north of the border undoubtedly worry about your safety in Mexico. This is understandable, of course. The American and Canadian media make it appear as though the entire country is rife with violence. We who live here do not feel particularly threatened. But how great is the risk of driving in Guadalajara at night? What is the risk of crossing the border at Nueva Laredo or Tijuana? What is the risk of traveling in Michoacan now?

The fact is, according to David Ropeik, an international consultant in risk perception and risk communication at Harvard, even bright people get it wrong. We often underestimate significant risks and overestimate trivial ones.

Some of the risks that many people worry about the most are nuclear radiation (from all sources), vaccines, and genetically modified food. The overwhelming evidence suggests that these pose little serious risk to us. On the other hand, people seem more than willing to assume more serious risks without worrying. Climate change may make large portions of the earth less habitable, regardless of its cause. People willingly over-eat non-nutritious, fatty food despite the very real health risks of obesity. And, of course, many drive while texting or talking on cell phones, clearly dangerous.

Why is this? One factor seems to be our sense of how much control we have over the risk. Plane crashes are particularly scary because they are completely out of our control, while we do not worry about the exponentially greater risk of dying in an automobile accident because we believe we have more control over that risk. We will poison ourselves with dangerous fast food, additives, and over-use of drugs but well become fearful and indignant of pesticides in our food, less dangerous but out of our control.

We also fear risks which will cause more suffering, diseases like cancer, more than we fear a quick death from heart disease, because we'd suffer less, even though heart disease is a bigger killer. We fear man-made risks, like radiation from technology, more than natural risks, like radiation from radon or from the sun.

Ropeik believes that this "gap" between perceived risk and actual risk extends to all segments of society. Interestingly, people who value hierarchical, individualistic structures in society, often conservative thinkers, fear things that might break down the status quo, like progressive tax systems and welfare for the poor. Those who value a system which will require that we all work together to solve problems, are most fearful of the increasing power of corporations or rich individuals who may not share their values. The fact is, both groups overestimate some risks and conveniently ignore risks which conflict with their personal values. Liberals ignore the risk of government over-reaching and control, while conservatives overlook the risk that corporations will cause severe environmental problems.

The fact is, if we're going to survive and prosper, we will need to find a way to rationally, objectively, assess real risk. Only then will we be able to act on those risks which present real danger and endure those which are not likely to cause much harm.

What do you fear? Are you ignoring significant risks to yourself while worrying about insignificant risks? I'd take that drive into Guadalajara but be careful about what you eat while you're there!