



Imagination is scarier than reality

There have been many occasions when I've been on a plane and we hit some bad turbulence that my heart started pounding. I am not a nervous flyer, per se, but sometimes I imagine elaborate scenarios of all the things that are going wrong in the cockpit and it freaks me out. I'll hear strange noises sometimes, and think it's the end. I'll start sweating. My heart will start beating harder and faster.

It happened last night again. I was on a flight cruising across the country to San Diego when the lights on the plane went out. I was concerned... not overly...but I certainly started to imagine why the lights went out. Did something short out? Was there spark? Does old wiring catch fire? Then, about 30 minutes later, the lights went out again. This time, my heart pounded a little harder. Then, about 20 minutes later, they went out again. A movie was playing on my iPad, but I couldn't focus on it. My eyes were peeled out the window instead, I was watching the wing and the engine to make sure everything was ok.

Staring out the window, I noticed that the stars were turning. We were turning. A huge turn. Aircrafts make course adjustments throughout a flight, I know that, but when you're heading across the country, there is no need for a 90+ degree turn. My breathing became shallow. My imagination was racing. I needed to put my mind at ease.

I hit the flight attendant call button. "I'm probably just being a nervous flying," I told the flight attendant, "I noticed the plane making a huge turn and have no idea why we're making a huge turn. Perhaps you could ask the captain to come on the PA to let us know what was happening," I suggested, knowing that hearing the captain would stop my mind from inventing scenarios..

The flight attendant leaned in and said, "we've lost one of our generators, but we have another one." My brow started to sweat profusely. "Is it dangerous?" I asked. "We have a second generator," she replied with false confidence. She looked shaken.

Not a minute later, the captain came on the PA. "Ladies and gentleman," he began politely, "we've lost our right engine generator and we've lost our APU," he said matter-of-factly referring to the auxiliary power unit - the plane's back-



up power generator. “Procedure dictates that in a situation like this, we divert, so we’re going to be landing in Oklahoma City.”

It was at that point, I started to relax. I didn’t know I was so relaxed, but I was. When I imagined something was going wrong, my heart was pounding. Now that something was wrong, I was cool as a cucumber.

The flight attendants came on the PA and asked us all to store our electronics, put our seats up our tray tables away and prepare for landing. “I’m not sure when we will be landing,” she said, “the pilots are busy, but we’ll be landing soon.”

About five minutes later we began to descend. There was a pretty thick cloud cover, so I couldn’t see the ground, though now and then I could see some hazy city lights through the clouds. I remarked to myself under my breath, “why are you so relaxed?” I was in disbelief. Getting wrapped up in my imagination I can bring myself to a near panic state. And now, when my heart should be pounding and I should be sweating...I wasn’t.

I paid attention to the landing procedures. Our airbrakes engaged to slow us down. That’s a good sign. The flaps extended - also a good sign. We were making a steady descent but I didn’t hear the wheels go down. Again, I spoke to myself out loud and under my breath, “no wheels.” And then actually continued to calmly declare, “well, if we have no wheels, I guess we’ll land on our belly.” The whole time, still remarking in disbelief how completely relaxed I was. I almost wanted my heart to speed up - it seemed more appropriate.

The wheels deployed shortly after and we landed safely in Oklahoma City with fire engines and ambulances lining the runway. We came to stop and were escorted by a whole fleet of emergency vehicles to the gate. I think the whole plane sighed a collective sigh of relief; it certainly was nice to be on the ground.

I made a few calls to let folks back home know what was going on. It was only then, telling the story, did I get a little emotional and feel my pulse rate increase. But we were ok and I found my composure pretty quickly.

I stayed the night at an airport hotel, still calm, waiting for an aftershock of panic. But it didn’t come. I wasn’t the least bit bothered by all the inconvenience of getting stuck and trying to get back home. We were safely on the ground and all that stuff was just plumbing.

Lying in bed that night, I replayed the events of the evening back in my head, still amazed at how relaxed I was. I also realized how our imaginations get the



better of us. The number of times I've imagined scenarios where I was going to lose everything at work if I made the wrong decision. The number of times I thought my career was over because of something that happened outside my control. Or, armed with only the proof or scenarios I conjured up in my own imagination, I thought people I liked or worked with were planning to abandon me. Yet, in reality, I still make decisions. I still take risks and make mistakes. Things go wrong all the time and yet we deal with them...and life goes on.

When things are fine, we look for all the things going wrong. We imagine. We fester. We worry. When things really do go wrong...and things always go wrong...we deal with it. We look for all the things going right. Before the captain came on, I could only see the lights going out and imagine a fire behind the walls. Once we were making our unscheduled landing with only one working generator, I listened for the flaps and wheels to deploy - signs of things going right.

This sudden change of perspective in times of danger - perhaps it's our survival instinct, a way we've developed to increase our chances of survival. Or perhaps, in times of stress and adversity, there really is hope and opportunity.

As an endnote, I would like to thank the flight crew of that Delta flight. I didn't get to thank them in person. They were grace under pressure. And the ground staff that greeted us at an all but closed Oklahoma City airport, they were fantastic. I've never in my life experienced such remarkable service and generous spirit.