

Trust exercise: Unexpected wallops

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

The blizzard hit more suddenly than predicted, dumping several inches on us by noon and stopping traffic dead in all the streets leading from our town to the outlying country. I was rushing to an appointment and, impatient with the slow progress of two people in front of me, I skirted around them, slipped on an icy hill and was momentarily airborne. When I fell back to earth I hit my head, hard.

I seemed to see it all from without: here was an icy hill slanting upward to the pale sky, bordered by converging black lines; and here was I, sailing toward the sky feet first in a great skidding arc, until the lines met and the picture went black.

Some minutes later I came to, brushed myself off, went into a friend's shop, and nearly passed out again. My friend called 911 and eventually an ambulance appeared. It's a trust exercise, said the EMT, as he lifted me onto a spine board. My part was simply to let myself be floated out the door. Our ride to the hospital took 45 minutes, long enough to discover that the EMT, senior warden for a nearby Episcopal church, was an extremely interesting fellow. So it was that, though it formed no conceivable part of my plan for the day, I found myself discussing Hooker's three-legged stool and other fine points of Anglican ecclesiology while strapped to a board, shivering under mounds of blankets, in a slow-moving ambulance.

We arrived to find the emergency room in disaster mode, with many stretchers in the hallway. I had to stay strapped to the board for some hours until a doctor could check me out; and then, oh, blessed release! A CAT scan and a few hours more to wait before I was cleared to leave, still dizzy and shaky, but basically all right.

Now what made this incident particularly interesting was this: like Socrates in the *Phaedo*, I experienced the proximity of pleasure to pain, of confusion to clarity. "Who's William James?" my husband asked, testing my coherence. "1842-1910," said I. It may have been the adrenaline, but I was feeling hyperlucid. Best of all, a host of preoccupations were shaken clean out of me; I was free to think more interesting thoughts.

It reminded me of the time I fell down a long staircase at the home of some English friends while holding my two-year-old child. I ricocheted from wall to banister all the way down, saw stars, and landed at the foot of the stairs with the child unharmed on my stomach. Once back home, I wrote my friends to say “this time I mean to fall up your stairs”—for I had finally decided to become a baptized Christian, as if that nudge down the stairs had shaken off the last vestiges of uncertainty.

Little shocks like this, provided that they are interruptive and not devastating, make philosophers of us all. Those hoary puzzles about chance, fate, causality and providence suddenly take on new meaning. Did an angel cushion my head so that the blow would be less serious? Or did an angel trip me so that I would have this interesting experience? Did a devil trip me and an angel catch me? Did God want me to learn, from my lapse in prudence, about the consequences of foolish haste?

The mystery is that the meeting between my head and the icy hill looks from one angle like a case of lawful cause and effect, from another like mere chance, and from a third like a disposition of divine providence. Even my lapse in prudence was encompassed by God’s higher prudence, the prudence of the divine Wisdom who reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other and orders all things well (Wisd. of Sol. 8:1). It’s part of Wisdom’s good order that, having sailed into the air, I was bound to make an abrupt return; it’s equally part of Wisdom’s good order that I might not have slipped at all, that the event was as contingent and unpredictable as most of our mortal affairs, and that its providential meaning was hard to discern. Thomas Aquinas gives the example of two servants who encounter each other on the road seemingly by chance, not knowing that their master has foreseen and intended that they should meet. There is a plan, but the servants must run their errands without knowing its details.

Yet though we may not know what the master intends, we do know “that in everything God works for good with those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). If we could be sure we saw the hand of providence in every mishap, we’d be at risk for self-inflation; if we could never let ourselves think it, we’d be at risk for anomie. It’s significant that the Lord’s message to Julian of Norwich that “all manner [of] thing shall be well” is cast in the future tense. For the present, then, our experiences are decidedly mixed. Unexpected wallops are like apocalypses in a teacup; they may not reveal cosmic secrets, but they do remind us of what we already know: that we are fragile creatures who can be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye; and that it’s our part to wait upon God with gratitude and trust.