

Survival handbook

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 4, 2001](#) issue

The second best-selling book on campuses these days is Joshua Piven and David Borgenicht's straight-faced but not unhumorous *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook* (Chronicle). The back cover alerts readers, "Caution: Book will explode if scanned." It is "the indispensable, indestructible guide for surviving life's sudden turns for the worse. Survival experts provide illustrated, step-by-step instructions on what you need to know FAST."

Such as how to deliver a baby in a taxicab; how to escape from killer bees; how to survive if your parachute fails to open; how to jump from a moving car; and how to survive a poisonous snake attack. Ever since Christmas, when our former pastor and his spouse gave us a copy, I've been thinking of how valuable a clerical copycat version of such a book might be, and have begun asking ministers about their "worst cases."

The *New York Times* recently reported one. At the dress rehearsal in Rome for the ceremonies that elevated 43 men to cardinal in February, the archbishop of New York, Edward M. Egan, discovered that "the red ceremonial robes that he had ordered turned out to be a few inches too long and had to be sent back to the tailor."

That bad case easily had a good outcome, thanks to the retinue and resources of archbishops. But what about the rest of us? I once showed up to give a commencement address and receive an honorary degree from the college nearest my birthplace, Midland College in Fremont, Nebraska. "No, need to lug a robe along. We'll order one," I had been told. The problem was that mine was nine inches too long. I followed the advice of fellow honorees: Use duct tape.

With astonishing frequency, the pastors I interviewed mentioned that more worst-case scenarios occur around weddings than around any other ministerial activity.

Scenario: During the walk-through rehearsal, with a professional bridal counselor at hand to run the show, you discover that the plans for the ceremony are on the wild

side.

Expert advice: Insist that whatever goes on in the house of God should have a house-of-God character. So no dogs as ring-bearers. No rear-cleavage gowns. No hip-hop songs. No overdose of Kahlil Gibran. The bluff just might work. You will leave everyone in tears, but the next day they will have a sacred ceremony.

Scenario: You forgot to show up for the rehearsal and now have to “do” the ceremony according to the bride’s and the counselor’s wishes.

Expert advice: Give the dog ether. Hand out shawls. Have the organist outblast the electronic noise-boxes. (You’d be surprised what power there is in an organ.) Pull the microphone cord and bellow something biblical. If that does not work, dash out through the emergency door that sets off fire alarms. Evacuate the church. Hold the wedding on the lawn.

Scenario: You and your spouse have to attend an endless rehearsal dinner, watch slides of baby pictures, watch two families interact. And the next night you have to be at an endless reception dinner, listening to too many toasts by too many souses.

Expert advice: Set an early curfew, always hold to it—even at your own children’s weddings—go home, work on your homily, toast each other. The following Sunday your congregation will have a sacred service.

Overall best advice: Don’t forget to stock duct tape for all occasions.