

Adam Robison's Fishing Incident (April 25, 2009)

Recently, I have become passionate about a new hobby, saltwater fishing. Due to its proximity, I often fish in Galveston Bay, Texas. For those of you who are not familiar with Galveston, it is one of the areas hit hardest by Hurricane Ike. Like any other body of water with a fairly strong current, there are multiple drownings and near drownings in Galveston each year. Attached are drowning and near drowning statistics published by the Galveston County Health District. As one might expect, most drowning incidents are swimming-related. However, there are also a number of fishermen who drown each year in Galveston County while fishing. Today, I almost became part of that statistic. The following is an attempt at a summary of this event.

Last Saturday (April 19, 2009), I was dying to go fishing. However, I was prevented from going due to a large thunderstorm.¹ Yesterday, I was again dying to go fishing again this weekend. The conditions, however, were not expected to be ideal for fishing. There was a fairly strong southeast wind (15-20mph) and reports of a strong current that, but for my strong desire to go, would have ordinarily convinced me not to go. My desire to go, however, "got the best of me," and, therefore, I decided to ignore the weather report. After all, I had read a number of reports of fishing successes that had occurred earlier in the week, notwithstanding the existence of similar weather conditions. In addition, I personally have caught fish in similar conditions.

After attending a housewarming party that ended at around 11:00 last night, I packed all of my gear and readied "the kayak," my fishing vehicle of choice. This morning, I awoke fairly excited at 4:30 AM to venture my luck at trying to catch some fish for us to eat tonight (the whole family loves Redfish (i.e., Red Drum) on a half shell). After completing my preparations and making the approximate 1 hour and 15 minute drive, I launched my kayak in Galveston's West Bay at 6:45. At first blush, conditions did not seem overly rough. However, it was high tide and there was a lot of water in the bay due to the recent precipitation.

At this point, I had essentially two choices: (1) try my luck in the flats (i.e., shallow marshy area) which several weeks ago had not given me much luck; or (2) fish the actual bay (i.e., deeper and stronger current). Without much foresight, I decided initially try the bay. After all, I had previously had success fishing the flats in the late morning, while I had not had similar success in the bay. After paddling to my usual location (just adjacent to a reef), I dropped my anchor and started fishing. I noted immediately that the conditions were less than ideal. As predicted, there was a strong Southeastern wind and the current was very strong. Before long, I decided it was time to turn around and go to the flats.

During my return from the bay, I started picking up a lot of unwanted water in my kayak. While this was not entirely unusual, it was problematic due to the relatively high waves and a drainage issue I encountered with the kayak. At one point, I was trying to turn the

¹ The thunderstorm hit hardest on Saturday. Naturally, on Sunday, our family's designated church day (i.e., no activities like fishing), the weather was gorgeous.

kayak to counter the pesky weather. While I am not precisely certain, I must have over negotiated my right turn, causing my kayak to capsize. I, along with all of my gear, was thrown from my kayak. Initially, I was not overly concerned because, based on my experience, that part of the bay is generally only about 4 feet deep. In addition, I was only about ¼ of a mile from the shore. I was shocked to find, however, that I could not touch bottom. I estimated that the water was about 6 feet deep.

After panicking a little, I decided that the best course of action would be to turn my kayak upright and re-embark. However, due to the aforementioned drainage issue (the plug to hull of my kayak pops out, so it takes in water), no matter what I tried, I was unable to re-embark the kayak without taking in too much water to stay afloat. I was also unsuccessful in my attempts at emptying the kayak. At that point, I decided it would be best to swim to the shore with the kayak in tow. Unfortunately, however, the current proved too strong. No matter what I did, I was swept out further into the bay. Thus, I relegated to simply using the kayak as a flotation device.²

Ordinarily, this part of West Bay is replete with fishing boats. However, as I looked around at the panorama, I did not see a single nearby vessel, with the exception of an oyster boat that was probably about ½ mile away. At that point, panic really struck in, so I began using my fog horn in attempt to capture the attention of the not so nearby oyster boat. Unsurprisingly, I was unable to gain access to their attention. However, I was able to fight the current just enough to place myself near enough to the shore where I could barely touch bottom. However, with the kayak in tow, I was unable to gain any ground, notwithstanding about 30 minutes of painstaking effort. Accordingly, without adequately assessing the situation, I decided to let go of the kayak and wade back to shore.³ After I let go of the kayak, the kayak immediately took off away from the shore and, unfortunately, so did I. After about 20 more minutes of fruitless struggling, I found myself again in 6 feet of water.

At this point, it is necessary to confess that, while I have always been fairly athletic, I am a horrible swimmer. I know how to tread water and swim short distances, but that is about it. Also, due to my body framework, I seem to naturally lack buoyancy. Therefore, I did the only thing I could: I treaded water. As you might expect, despite my effort to move toward the shore, I managed only to stay in 6 feet of water. No matter how much I tried, I simply could not overcome the strength of the current. At this point, for the first time, I started to think I might not make it. After all, aren't I a poor swimmer? Wasn't there still not a single boat in view, except for that useless oyster boat? The answer to both questions was an undeniable yes. At one point in time, I seriously contemplated giving up.

Prior to convincing myself to simply give up, I decided to do a "final" self-evaluation. I recall asking and answering the following questions:

² Yes, I am an idiot for not wearing a flotation device. Like drivers who are near there home, however, I was overly certain of my surroundings. In addition, I thought that the water was only a few feet deep.

³ Again, yes, I am an idiot for letting go of my only flotation device.

Question: Was I a good person?

Conclusion: Yes, I am a fairly good person, but I could and should have been better.

Question: What was the most important thing in my life?

Conclusion: Without a doubt, my family.

Question: How will my death affect my family?

Conclusion: While my family (depending on the terms of my life insurance, which I wish I would have read more fully) would likely be financially sound (and, perhaps better-off after Amy married an affluent orthopedic surgeon), they would be extremely negatively affected. I knew, without a doubt, that, despite my flaws, my family loved me very much.

After reaching the last conclusion, I promised myself that I would not give up until there was absolutely nothing left. With that, I surveyed the surrounding water and determined that I may be able to make more progress if I tried to swim a little right of the shore as opposed to directly at the shore, since the current was moving directly from the shore to the bay. I also spotted a fairly large oyster bed in that direction which I decided to use as my point in reference. To my relief, I was able to make progress after shedding my neoprene waders and favorite fishing jacket. I can't tell you the joy experienced when my foot was cut on an oyster shell.

Notwithstanding my achievement of this success, I was unable to make any more progress. Accordingly, I focused my efforts not at reaching the oyster bed, but simply maintaining the status quo (i.e., bobbing up and down in 5 ¾ feet of water). While the current "got the best of me" at times, I was able to keep my ground. I knew, at some point, someone would come by that spot (which is a pretty good fishing spot). As predicted, I spotted my first bay boat about 250 – 300 yards from where I was "bobbing position." I yelled with all my might (the fog horn was long out of gas) in an attempt to attract the attention of the overly focused fishermen. My efforts, however, were to no avail. After treading for approximately another hour, I spotted three bay boats, one of which traveled within 100 yards of my position. Again, however, my yelling (which had become much weaker at that point) did not attract their attention.

At some point in time, I noted that some of the fishermen from one of the bay boats were doing something awkward. While I did not know it, I subsequently learned that they were pilfering my kayak and supplies (I have no idea if these fishermen ever saw me, but they certainly did not appear to be looking too hard). After another half hour or so, one of the bay boats positioned itself in a potential fishing spot less than 100 yards from where I was located. I decided to make a last ditch effort to attract their attention. Garnering every last bit of my strength, I screamed, splashed, hollered, and cursed (Mormon curse words, of course). Finally, the boat started to move in my direction.

When they reached me, I was too exhausted to lift myself onto the boat, as I had been frantically treading water for approximately 2-3 hours. Accordingly, two of them had to

reach in the water and yank me out. I just laid on the deck of the boat for approximately ten minutes before I was able to sit-up. After I regained some of my strength, I graciously thanked the men for interrupting their fishing expedition to pick me up. The Captain of the boat (a fishing guide) explained that he had heard my pleas earlier, but thought I was just a wader raising a ruckus. He also informed me about the “Pilfering No-Good Samaritans.” At that point, however, I could not have cared less about my stuff.

The Captain then allowed me to use his cell phone to call Amy. Amy, who was at a neighbor friend’s birthday party, did not appear to grasp my little “fish story.” However, since I thought that I would never have the opportunity to hear her voice again, I did not care at all. By the time I arrived at home, the message had clearly sunken in.

From this experience, I learned a number of practical and spiritual lessons. They are briefly summarized below:

My Fishing Lessons

1. Don’t ever become too complacent. The water is your friend. It affords all kinds of entertainment. However, the water merits respect. It is heavy, omnipresent, and strong. If you lack respect for the water, you may find yourself dead.
2. Wear a stinking life jacket, even if it is one of those ugly orange ones. Keep your cell phone in a water-proof bag. I could have prevented everything if I simply had a communication device. I typically have surprisingly good cell phone reception out on the bay. Obviously, I should also have brought other safety necessities, such as flares or some other form of communication device (e.g., Ham Radio).
3. Trust your “safety instincts.” If your intuition says, “don’t go fishing today,” don’t fish. If you know it is safer to fish in one location over another, choose the safer area, even if it means you may catch fewer fish. After walking about ½ a mile back to my car on the cement, with oyster shell-cut feet, I learned from a fellow kayaker, that fishing was much better in the flats today than the bay.
4. Bring a fishing buddy. I typically try to invite a friend. Today, in fact, I invited a friend to come. He, however, opted not to come.
5. Make certain your boat is in top shape before taking it out.
6. Inform someone that if you have not contacted them by a certain time, you are likely in trouble. Had I made such a plan with Amy before my trip, I probably could have saved myself a lot of water treading time.

My Spiritual Lessons

1. For some reason, I am a naturally practical and critical thinker (although my actions today are not reflective of same). As a result, I frequently have difficulty attributing positive outcomes to divine intervention. At times, I feel very much like “Doubting Thomas.” I sometimes feel divine intervention is used by people as a “catch-all” to explain something that is either entirely explicable by circumstance or simply not readily subject to non-divine explanation. That said, when I was in the water, I prayed not less than ten times. I recall asking God specifically, on more than one occasion, to “help give me the strength to swim to shore” and “make those stupid fishermen over there see me.” At no time, was my answer given exactly as requested. Nonetheless, here I am writing this overly-exhaustive summary about my experiences. Thus, while I am uncertain to whom credit should be given, I have unequivocally decided to give most of the credit to God. I did not personally see or feel him do anything. However, it is to him whom I pleaded in my time of need.
2. My family is the most important thing to me. My job and friends are very important to me. However, my family is irreplaceable. In accordance with this conclusion, I will try my hardest to treat them with the respect to which they are entitled. That said, my kids are still going to be punished if they refuse to clean their rooms.

Answers to Possible Questions

1. Will I go fishing again? *Absolutely. I will, however, exercise a lot more caution.*
2. Was I hurt? *Not really. My legs had started cramping (which, as I understand, is one of the reasons why people often drown), so they are very sore. My feet were cut by oyster shells and Galveston Bay is not the cleanest body of water, so I am fighting infection. I also had a badly bruised or broken rib before this event (another story); it is, of course, not any better. I swallowed a lot of water (nasty stuff). The water seems to be running through my system pretty quickly. Other than that, I am fine.*
3. Did I lose all of my stuff? *Yes, I lost everything, with the exception of my keys and wallet. My Firm-owned Blackberry was among the casualties. The good news is that I now have an excuse to upgrade my phone and kayak.*