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Portals

Science fiction Portals are amazing. Pass through an undulating Portal, or Worm Hole, or even Dorothy's tornado, and experience altered realities, new dimensions; see the universe from a new perspective.

Career firefighters usually pass through a 'Portal' of sorts, a Safety Awareness Portal, achieving new perspectives, their reality altered. Transiting the Portal can be painful, maybe physically, always emotionally. They are often related to traumatic events such as South Canyon, Mann Gulch, Thirty Mile, Cramer, or a less legendary incident; perhaps a near miss, or a personal Waterloo. It may have happened to us, or involve a co-worker, or we have strong empathy for a situation we read about. Some think there is no significant emotional growth without a link to traumatic experience.

Many have been through the Portal before us. Once through the Portal, you straighten up, blink your eyes, and finally comprehend how veterans you previously considered bland and worrisome embody a depth of humanity. They understand the severe implications of risk, and demonstrate an absolute commitment to safe practice. Entry level firefighters must be very careful when choosing which old salts to emulate.

Transiting the Portal is likened to a wake-up call, or the light turning on. All of a sudden we 'get it'. Dorothy learns "There is no Place Like Home". Firefighters see the forest as trees that will grow back, we see buildings as 'things' that will also 'grow back'; we correctly see each human life as precious and irreplaceable, it can never grow back.

What? You haven't had the near miss- the traumatic event? Does that make you inherently dangerous? Firefighters are good people, courageous people; but can we transit the Portal without personal trauma? Within lies the objective for every safety course ever written, the intention of every strategy and tactics author, the anxious hope of every supervisor and manager; we promote staff rides and distribute investigation reports.

It would be easy to see the many rule and guideline systems as perfunctory bureaucratic quagmires. But the 10 and 18, Downhill and Indirect Fireline Guidelines, Common Denominators of Tragedy Fires, Work Rest Guidelines, Complexity Analysis, Fire Behavior Pocket Cards, Lessons Learned, Leadership Curriculum, LCES and others, all have deeply personal foundations, invented by compassionate individuals, who have been through the Portal. We have learned these lessons the hard way.

Involvement in a traumatic event is no guarantee you will 'get it', or pass through the Portal. Feeble New Year's resolutions don't count. Transiting a Portal is a deep and absolute process; it is career changing. We try out the new mode with untried legs, wobbling about, trying again, figuring out practical adjustments, and in time have a solid, very personal way of life. When we cross this plane, compliance is no longer a struggle; the individual becomes a motivated leader, with courage to do the right thing. 10 and 18, I-HOG, Driving Regs all become obvious- it's a wonder anyone would not 'get it'. It seems nuts to ride without a seatbelt.

After transiting the Portal, complacency or sloppy decisions are buffered by deeper insight, often called a core value, core meaning all the way to the bone. Our human tendency to rationalize, succumb to peer-pressure, or miss incremental changes is restrained.

How can we get any work done if all we do is worry about safety? Oddly enough, production seems to improve. Decisions improve. These core values are license for confident aggressive firefighting.

Firefighters who have learned these lessons, through either personal experience *or by studying momentous events*, understand the eyes hurting, snot running fear firefighters may be subjected to. They can visualize a wall of flames bearing down, and run many 'what if' scenarios in their head. They will never identify safety zones without considering these implications. They intrinsically understand the timing and trigger point elements critical to escape routes, they know what a lookout must see, and with intuitive wisdom recognize when communications are compromised. Underestimated fire behavior is factored in.

The new dimension, or awakening, induces new meaning and sophistication for a seemingly simple concept. For example, LCES becomes the lens bringing safe and aggressive strategy and tactics into focus. It becomes a business model. It guides us as we consider safety for children playing in the back yard.

Now, the truth. Science fiction is rarely about the future; it's a clever way to have an intelligent discussion about conditions and situations on Earth, right now. Science fiction writers rarely leave their characters out in new dimensions. At the last possible moment they heroically make it home. There are no climactic escapes back from the Safety Awareness Portal. There is no going back. Once you 'get it' you will never trade tactical objectives for life safety. You are unwilling to subject firefighters to situations where last minute heroics are necessary. Hopefully, things are very mundane. We manage risk.

Such is the altered reality, the new dimensions, of transiting the Safety Awareness Portal.