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Robert Dziekanski holds a small table at Vancouver International Airport in this image from video. The would-be Polish immigrant's last minutes in the Vancouver airport were captured on video. The video shows Dziekanski alternating between fear and calm as he stands in the international arrivals terminal Oct. 14.

# Electric fear, eclectic fears

**This is the true North strong and free. How could it be dangerous to visit?**

**A**irports are fascinating points of intersection. They are an interstitial place, a borderland where one world meets another; where ideas, emotions and values collide.

Despite our frantic and heightened attention to almighty security, airports are usually where people kiss, embrace and scurry back to their homes. Airports are not places where people die.

Today, in countries everywhere, the airport symbolizes a space where we have crossed the line from humanity to inhumanity. The airport is a site of pain that represents who we are at our worst, a species moved by the least noble of sentiments.

The fingers point everywhere in the tragic death Robert Dziekanski, our disoriented Polish visitor. We watch him flail, convulse and die accompanied by the unnatural sound-track of 50,000 volts of electricity.

What can we learn from this horrific event? What does this tragic event say about us? Some prefer to point their fingers at the obvious, the de-evolution of our once mighty RCMP, today a fallen institution searching for a new identity. We wonder what has happened to our once-proud symbol of restraint and fairness. Our noble officers, our dedicated sons and daughters, are not without responsibility, and some are making spirited calls for criminal charges.

I have to ask, were these individuals provided the appropriate education and training to deal with our ever-increasing and complex threats? Some say that the RCMP is the easy target, the media fall guy. The RCMP may have it coming, but another culprit is the Taser itself, a bloodless weapon touted to save lives and fatten pockets.

In my view, the Taser is no more to blame than electricity. Those in other countries watching the scene on CNN suggest a possible contributor: the growing intolerance in Canada, once a nation of powerful immigrants, but now a fumbling bunch of A-Team wannabes who can't summon an interpreter in order to calm a tired and unarmed visitor or perform life-saving action after repeated Taser strikes.

How do you feel when you watch other less-free countries put our country on their travel advisories? I cannot help but shake my head and wonder: Oh, Canada, Canada, Canada. This is the true North strong and free. How could it be dangerous to visit? What has become of us?

If we blame anything or anyone, it should not be the RCMP, the makers of Taser, frazzled airport workers or those who still believe we



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have become too much like our neighbours. No, most who have experience in crisis situations know the real culprit — fear.

When fear takes hold, you are capable of imagining and seeing the worst. When fear strikes, you lose confidence in your own humanity. Ask any police officer, social worker, gated-home developer, teacher or terrorist — nothing is more powerful than fear. Fear will make you drown your best friend. Fear will make you shoot your toddler at midnight. Fear alone summons our greatest demons.

In times of national crisis, fear makes us turn on each other. Ask all those citizens who have been interned or forced onto reserves. It makes us less than human. Fear compels us to behave in ways that destroy our ideals. It makes us wary of toothpaste and hair gel. It makes us consider umbrellas as life-threatening.

I take off my shoes at the airport and wonder which is a bigger threat — crepe soles or cotton shoelaces. Fear makes us justify despicable, laughable and unnecessary acts. When fear struck the airport personnel, who could blame them for calling the police? When fear

struck the police, who could blame them for trying out their shiny new weapons? Who can blame the officer who knelt on a dying man's neck?

It can be argued that the airport is the post-modern locus of our greatest nightmares: terrorism, hijackers, hostages and unimaginatively bad shopping. It all unravels like a tensor bandage gone awry as you and I (and the guy over there who can't speak English) become threats — depersonalized and treated with unspeakable indifference.

A crackhead will kick open a door tonight. Somewhere else in our native land, a child will be abducted. At your local school, someone will threaten someone. A man will be beaten outside a bar for no reason. Next morning, if you are walking in any downtown, you will see fresh blood on the sidewalk. And at Canadian airports forevermore, we'll hug each other but never feel quite safe.

We frail, frightened and highly armed human beings have every reason to be afraid. Look at what we are capable of in a hockey game or in a marriage. Wives are afraid of their husbands and vice versa. Neighbours make neighbours nervous. Teachers are afraid of their students. What is the result of all this palpable emotion? What is the terrorist's true objective? What is the bully's true objective? What is the enforcer's true objective?

Fear makes cowards of us all. Nothing can change a community or a country or a family as quickly as fear.

And so, we ask, what is the antidote? What can we do to make sure that a minor, everyday conflict does not end in cruel death? Is the answer more high-tech weaponry, video cameras, strip searches and confiscated hair mousse?

Listen? So much depends upon our ears. Our eyes betray us. When our hearts are racing, our eyes do not see straight. But our ears, if we use them, can tell us the truth, and the truth is very basic: we are all lost children. All we want to do is go home.

Conflict resolution is just a fancy term for the simplest of acts, the act of listening. "What language do you speak? How are you? Are you OK? What can I do to make you feel more comfortable? I know you are afraid. So am I. Let's work this out together."

Robert Dziekanski was 40. He died on Oct. 14, 10 hours after he landed at Vancouver International Airport. He was on his way to Kamloops to live with his mother.

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