

Gephyrophobia

The innate beauty of bridges — both from design and appearance — should inspire awe and not heart-racing anxiety.

BRIAN BRENNER

Everyone is afraid of something, even engineers. But with a slew of things that rightfully inspire fear comes one issue that engineers have a hard time acknowledging: the fear of bridges. For those who have no conception of this phobia, here is a medical definition:

“An abnormal and persistent fear of bridges, especially crossing bridges. Sufferers of this phobia experience undue anxiety even though they realize their fear is irrational. Their fear may result partly from the fear of enclosure (claustrophobia) or the fear of heights (acrophobia). Phobic drivers may worry about being in an accident in busy traffic or losing control of their vehicles. High bridges over waterways and gorges can be especially intimidating, as can be very long or very narrow bridges.

“Fear of bridges is a relatively common phobia although most people with it do not know they have something called *gephyro-*

phobia. However, the derivation of the word *gephyrophobia* is perfectly straightforward (if you know Greek); it is derived from the Greek words *gephyra* (bridge) and *phobos* (fear).”¹

Fear of bridges? Gephyrophobia? How could anyone be afraid of a bridge?

Two bridges come to mind that maybe could explain why some people have an aversion to these structures. Figure 1 shows a picture of the first Tacoma Narrows Bridge. This bridge, as everyone knows, danced in the wind and has now served as the primary subject of a film loop displaying the dynamic effects of structures in the wind for generations of engineering students (see Figure 2). Figure 3 shows a picture of the first Sunshine Skyway Bridge, which crosses Tampa Bay. This bridge tanked after being hit by a barge. Figure 4 shows the rebuilt Sunshine Skyway.

All right, maybe it is possible to be afraid of bridges. Although it seems like being afraid of pizza would make more sense. Overall, bridges are pretty safe. The odds are greater that you will choke on a piece of pizza than you will drive off a bridge. Also, a pizza with extra cheese can burn your tongue and throat. Even a really hot-looking bridge cannot burn your tongue and throat.

A Thing of Beauty & Awe

The first time I visited Tampa, I went out of my way to drive across the new Sunshine Skyway (I tend to go out of my way to find bridges a lot

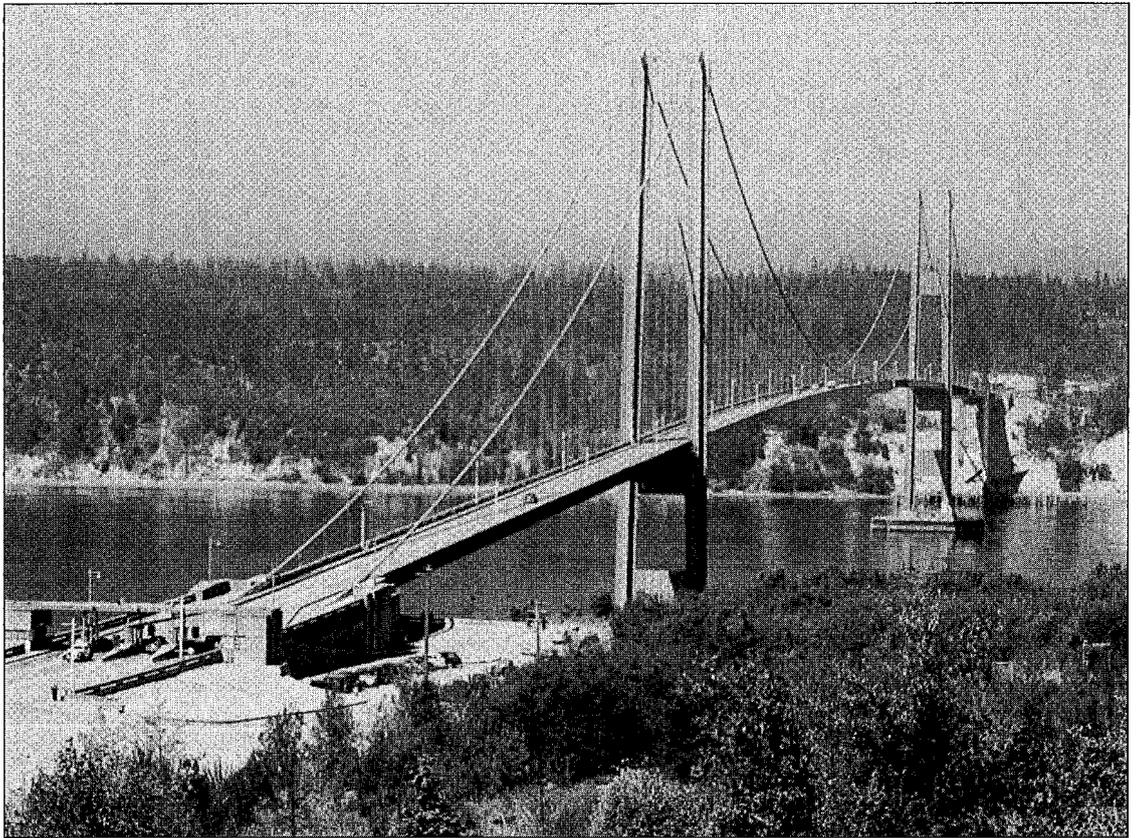


FIGURE 1. The first Tacoma Narrows Bridge.

on trips). The Skyway is the spectacular, signature cable-stayed bridge that crosses Tampa Bay for five and a half miles, and replaces the older defunct span. The bridge is so long, that when driving on it after a while you cannot see the shoreline. It feels like you are driving out on the ocean. Mile after mile, there is just you and your lonely automobile, lost atop the deep blue of the sea, with no land in sight. Then, way out in the middle of the bridge (in which you are lost! lost!), you start to rise on a fearsome, steep climb on narrow lanes with only a tiny, insubstantial concrete rail parapet protecting you from a dismal plunge into the shark-infested bay. The steep slope flattens out, but then you find yourself on the middle of the main span, suspended in mid-air, impossibly high above the infinite deep blue abyss. The single plane of golden cables are probably strong, but from your vantage point they look like twine, ready to snap at the slightest jerk or breeze. A fierce crosswind buffets your car. You

grip the steering wheel in terror, knuckles turning white as the blood flow is constricted. You try to chart a straight line in the road lane, hoping not to slip ever so slightly to the side, next to the flimsy, insubstantial rail and then over, in a screaming plummet into the anonymous brine.

OK, so maybe I felt a slight twinge of anxiety as I crossed the Sunshine Skyway — me, one of the world's great appreciators of bridges, and I found myself coming down with gephyrophobia. There was no way this structural engineer could develop a fear of bridges. What if people found out? I would have to nip the anxiety in the bud, and I would have to do it fast, or who knew would mental malady I would come down with next: Dementia? Schizophrenia? An insatiable desire to save old engineering reports?

The Downside of Gephyrophobia

I found a website that specializes in all types

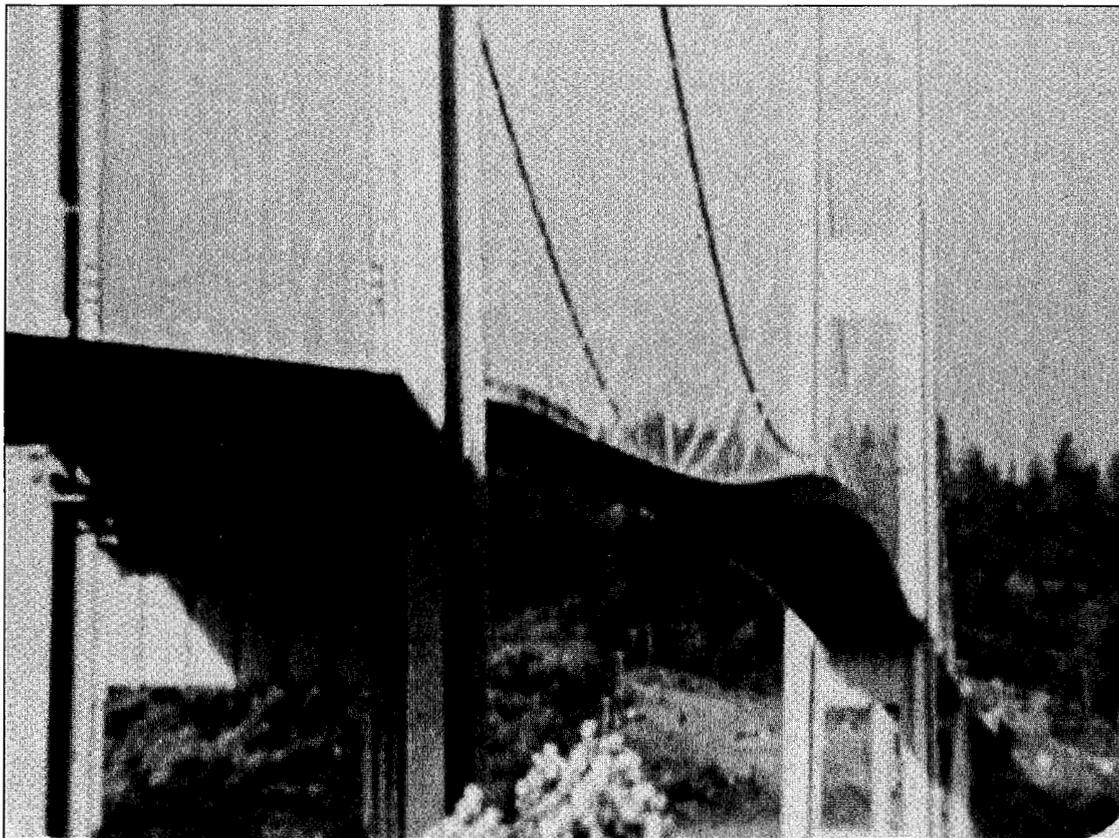


FIGURE 2. The first Tacoma Narrows Bridge doing what it is best remembered for.

of anxieties. According to Change That Right Now (CTRN), geophyrophobia can be more debilitating than you might think:

“If you are living with fear of bridges, what is the real cost to your health, your career or school, and to your family life? Avoiding the issue indefinitely would mean resigning yourself to living in fear, missing out on priceless life experiences big and small, living a life that is just a shadow of what it will be when the problem is gone.

“For anyone earning a living, the financial toll of this phobia is incalculable. Living with fear means you can never concentrate fully and give your best. Lost opportunities. Poor performance or grades. Promotions that pass you by. Your phobia could cost you tens, even hundreds of thousands of dollars over your lifetime, let alone the cost to your health and quali-

ty of life. Now fear of bridges can be gone for less than the price of a round-trip airline ticket.”²

Apparently the fear of bridges is quite common, and hundreds if not thousands of people avoid bridges by taking tunnels instead — that is, until they develop a fear of tunnels, and then they are either stuck on the ferry, driving tens or even hundreds of miles out of their way, or they have to stay home.

According to CTRN, there are hundreds of things to be afraid of (over 1,300, in fact). Most of these phobias are associated with issues that, in a rational sense, are not really life-threatening — fear of public speaking, for example, in comparison to the fear of being eaten by a squid. Many people report that public speaking is their greatest fear of all. If they had a choice, they would probably choose to swim with killer squid instead of getting up in front of 300 people for a pres-



FIGURE 3. The Skyway Bridge after its tussle with a barge.

entation. In that case, they would be eaten by a squid before the presentation and then they would not have to worry about the speech.

The anxieties reported by CTRN are modern maladies. At the dawn of time, mankind did not have to worry about gephyrophobia. There were not many bridges and no one drove across them. There were plenty of things to be afraid of, of course. For example, while there were no PowerPoint presentations in the cave, you did have to worry about getting attacked by a large carnivore (in the grand scheme of things, a much more substantial fear). With mankind's triumph over the carnivores, it seems like our psyches, which are probably naturally wired to be afraid (that flight or fight response can probably take credit for our species' current dominance on this planet), are experiencing a fear deficit. We have filled the fear gap with modern anxieties, including, sadly, the fear of bridges.

A Cure

What to do about this grievous malady? Hypnosis is one option. A website named

HypnosisDownloads.com offers self-hypnosis tapes that can help you overcome this particular fear:

*"The thought of being relaxed while driving across a bridge probably feels impossible to you, but you will be amazed after listening to *Fear of Driving Over Bridges*."*³

Your therapy begins with only a modest payment of \$12.95, plus shipping and handling. As an extra bonus, after being hypnotized by this tape, when you wake up, you will think you are a chicken. (I apologize: That was a cheap hypnosis joke.)

Gephyrophobia is not a joke, although I have done my best to milk it for what it is worth here. The fear of bridges is big business. You can shell out quite a bit for hypnosis tapes and therapy. If that does not work, you can actually hire people to drive your car across the intimidating bridge. The Chesapeake Bay Bridge is a good candidate for this solution. The bridge is so long, so high in the air, so exuberant and so separated from the shore that

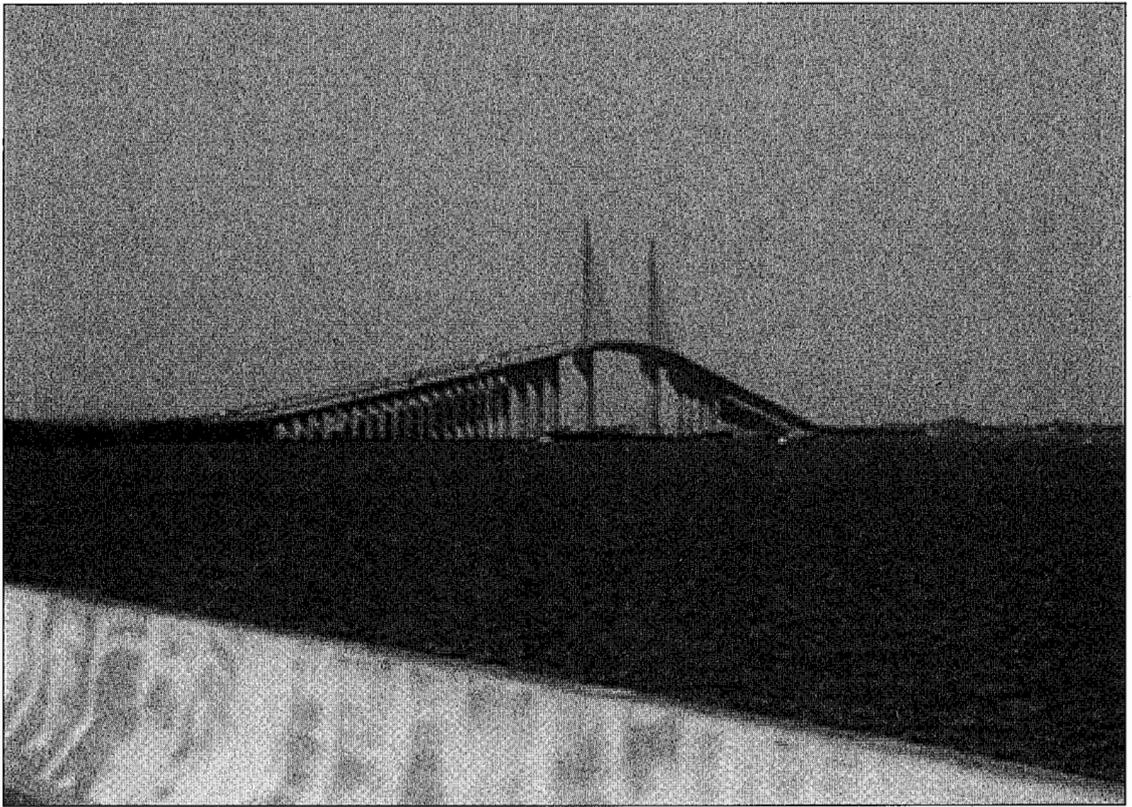


FIGURE 4. The rebuilt Sunshine Skyway.

driving across it is not for everyone. In fact, the Maryland Transportation Authority provides information for "drive over" services, companies that will drive your car across the bridge for a modest fee. There must be some demand for this service since 4,000 people use it annually.⁴ Hire a driver, add a little sleeping medication to the mix and you can get from Annapolis to the east shore of the bay without ever seeing how close you ended up swimming with the fishes.

Pragmatic Relief

One way of overcoming anxiety is to confront your fears. Using this method is how I overcame my fear of public speaking, and how I have now overcome my slight, not-worth-mentioning case of gephyrophobia. By sharing my anxiety with you, by airing it all out in public, I am freed from the mildly gripping fear. Now I can proceed with my life, and I do not have to shell out \$12.95, plus shipping and handling. Are you afraid of bridges? You can

overcome it! Here is my program: Watch the Tacoma Narrows videotape for a few hours and then find a nice, long, high and delicately supported bridge to drive across. Do this a few times on a windy, stormy day until your confidence builds and the anxiety slowly drains. Follow this program and you, too, can join the ranks of the bridge-fearless (I wish there was a Greek-derived word for this). Do it because bridges should be appreciated and not feared. Do it now, and start to experience a life free of gephyrophobia.

Do it, and don't worry about the fact that every time you cross the bridge, the odds are infinitesimally increased that something bad will happen the next time you cross it.

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