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We Can All Learn From Sully!

When US Airways Flight 1549 glided to a smooth water landing in the Hudson River in mid-January, we all marveled at the skill and courage of the pilot, Captain Chesley B. Sullenberger. As a direct result of his actions that cold afternoon, 155 passengers got to watch the event on the evening news!

Quite apart from the uplifting emotions resulting from this positive outcome, might there be some “take-away” lessons that we might derive and apply to our own lives? Consider the following for starters:

- **Always have a Plan B:** Every pilot has a checklist for unexpected emergencies to eliminate unnecessary fumbling and indecisiveness. Do you have a back-up strategy for financing your child’s college education if he/she is unable to obtain scholarships or grants? Or do you have a contingency plan for assisting an elderly relative who may come to rely on you for helping them address their day to day needs?
- **Keep cool during a crisis:** Pilots don’t have the luxury of an emotional meltdown when things go wrong. Do you waste valuable energy worrying or “catastrophizing” when life tosses you a curveball? Our crises can range from a relationship problem to a serious medical diagnosis – and a bit of initial worry is only natural—but the ability to focus on possible solutions early is the key to getting beyond the crisis and into the recovery mode.
- **Avoid dramatics:** Becoming emotionally animated depletes energy needed for problem-solving and can be distracting. Remember that Captain Sullenberger uttered but three words as he masterfully steered his Airbus A320 toward the water: “Brace for impact.”
- **Expect some bird strikes:** Not every friendship will be problem-free and not every new skill we attempt to master will be acquired effortlessly. But the ability to accept, adjust and move on is the secret of surviving whatever gaggle of geese life throws our way.
- **Trust and believe in yourself:** Air traffic controllers advised Captain Sullenberger to divert to a smaller airport nearby. But he later stated that he was “too low, too slow and unfamiliar with the Teterboro airport” and made the decision to ditch in the river. Sully knew that with two dead engines, the chances of gliding to the airport over heavily populated northern New Jersey was not the best choice. As we progress through life, we develop knowledge and skill sets upon which we may need to rely in critical situations. These life lessons may be as simple as “Always tell the truth, regardless of the penalties.”
- **Practice teamwork:** As Sully glided silently over the George Washington Bridge to the river below, he relied on co-pilot Jeffrey Skiles to monitor the diminishing altitude and on flight attendants Doreen Walsh, Sheila Dail and Donna Dent to calm the passengers and maintain order in the cabin. Whether at work or at home, learning to function as a team ensures success and lowers everyone’s stress level.
- **Complete the task at hand:** Before exiting the aircraft, Captain Sullenberger walked the aisle twice just to be sure that no passengers remained on board. Do we take time to dot that final “i” or cross that final “t” when we near the end of a challenging task?
- **Practice humility:** In spite of accolades from the media and a standing ovation at this year’s Super Bowl, Captain Sullenberger has avoided the spotlight and remains a humble hero. As he was quoted as saying shortly after the incident, “My crew and I were just doing our job.”

As we celebrate the wonderful story of Flight 1549, let’s continue to reflect on how Captain Sullenberger’s actions that day can enlighten and inspire us as we spend the day “just doing our job.”