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'Speed' Factor Revs Up Big-Firm Love

It seems to make otherwise intelligent and rational people ignore the most obvious office realities

The Snark
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Image: Stockbyte Platinum

Until last week, honestly, I had never pondered the question. But apparently, both astronauts and lawyers are capable of separating the intelligence they used to achieve their coveted positions from the emotional need they have to find -- and keep -- that "special someone."

Witness the sad story of Lisa Marie Nowak, a NASA astronaut charged last week with, among other things, attempted murder and attempted kidnapping after she confronted a woman she believed to be a rival for the affections of astronaut Bill Oefelein in the parking lot of the Orlando International Airport in Florida. Nowak, who was wearing a wig and a trench coat, allegedly also was

packing a steel mallet, a folding knife and several feet of rubber tubing. Not your typical array of Valentine booty.

Now, orbiting the earth for a living is a far more coveted career than pushing paper at a Big Firm, but achieving success in both fields requires years of training, education and fire drills. Not to mention being submerged in water while strapped to your seat. OK, I think most law firms have done away with that.

Still, despite all that training and mental toughness, it seems nothing can stop the basic human instinct to "make a connection" with another human being.

Sure, we can all sit back and judge Nowak, who allegedly drove all night in a diaper so she wouldn't have to take bathroom breaks just to confront the woman she thought was movin' in on her man. But we also must consider what caused her intense emotions over a co-worker to override all rational thought.

THE 'SPEED' FACTOR

No one knows for sure, of course, but I have a theory. I think it is the "Speed" factor.

No, I am not suggesting drugs were involved. I am talking about the Sandra Bullock/Keanu Reeves movie in which Bullock is a bus driver and Reeves is a police officer, and they are trying to prevent a bomb from killing everyone on the bus. If the bus slows down, "Boom!" So for what feels like an eternity, Bullock and Reeves are trapped on a speeding metal behemoth, barely surviving death on at least 10 occasions, and "getting to know each other."

After enduring this stressful environment, saving all the passengers on the bus and living to tell about it, what else is left to do but fall into each others' arms and kiss like mad?

I'm assuming astronaut romance blooms in a similar environment. I don't know for sure that Nowak and Oefelein ever actually left the Earth's orbit together, but really, how much more bonded can you be with another human being than by weathering intense NASA training sessions, much less spending long intervals of time racing through space together, depending on each other for survival, sharing dried ice cream and repairing the oxygen line?

It's not all that different from the life of a Big Firm Cog, where you spend more time with your fellow Cogs and partners than with the

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person you pledged to love 'til death do you part. What can bring you closer than pulling four consecutive all-nighters in a windowless conference room and snacking on Funyuns from the vending machine while rifling through deal documents? Plus, the shared trauma when a Partner discovers you and your fellow Cog forgot to confirm that the exhibits actually were shipped to the court is roughly comparable to being hurtled back to Earth after coming out of orbit in deep space. It's all about the "Speed" factor.

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I think the "Speed" factor explains how many Big Firm romances get started. The deep space/conference room scenarios are a lot like reality show romance. If you place a bunch of people in a house together and cut them off from the outside world for a few months, someone is going to start hooking up with a new roommate and forget about that loyal girlfriend back home in Nebraska: "She just doesn't understand me anymore. And besides, she is there, and I am here."

In addition to the "Speed" factor, hooking up with a Big Firm co-worker has many perks. You don't have to explain why you can't make it home for dinner, why you are in a foul mood or why your abs aren't what they used to be. Your fellow Cog understands. She knows you don't have time to run out and buy a mass-produced, diamond-heart pendant for Valentine's Day -- you have a brief to write!

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After eating more meals with you than anyone else, she knows you are allergic to garlic, averse to vegetables and enamored with pine nuts. How can you not fall for someone after watching her "in action": slumped at her computer, feverishly typing that memo ahead of the arbitrary deadline? Now that is sexy!

And who can stroke your ego more than someone who has watched you survive day in and day out at the Big Firm? "You really stood up to Psycho Partner yesterday when he accused you of trying to steal that client from him. That took real nerve. Go get 'em, Tiger!"

Based on my years of observation, it seems these upsides are enough for some Big Firm attorneys to engage in interoffice romances despite having spouses at home, children in private school and mortgages that take half of their paychecks. It seems the logical skills that helped them nail the LSATs have been overruled by the lovesick desire to have as much self-gratification as possible.

"Who cares if my husband gets the house, if I have to pay alimony for the rest of my life, if my partnership status is jeopardized by my affair with a first-year associate? He gets me. He appreciates me. He laughs at my jokes and remembers to pick the tomatoes out of my salad."

"Speed" factor love -- induced by stress, close physical proximity and near-death experiences -- seems to blind otherwise intelligent and rational people to the most obvious realities. For example:

- Attempting to kidnap a rival for your lover's affections can never have a good ending;
- You forget that your secretary a) knows those flowers you had sent to the Firm were not for your wife, and b) can see when you call the hot new associate in real estate eight times a day -- even though you are not in the same practice group and have no work together;
- Printing angst-ridden poems you have written for a fellow Cog with lines like, "You have the softest lips I have ever kissed; who cares if the case gets dismissed?" at work will always lead to firmwide knowledge of your relationship; and
- You don't realize that the Firm conducts daily searches of all e-mail for words like "love," "hot momma" and "stud." Nothing at the Big Firm should require you ever to type the word "love."

So, Big Firm lovers, enjoy your relationship while it lasts. Think twice before deciding to wear a diaper and drive across several states in the name of love and always remember -- Keanu Reeves was not in "Speed 2." By then Sandra had replaced him with a new beau.

Also, I am pretty sure almost every couple that gets engaged at the end of "The Bachelor" and "The Bachelorette" series ends up never speaking again. Even if they ultimately get married.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Do you have dirt to dish? Do you have a column idea? Or do you just need to vent in six-minute increments? E-mail The Snark at snarkatlanta@yahoo.com.