

Opinion

Why Carry Ballast? It's So 20th Century

Many people don't enjoy waiting but just seem to accept it as a fact of life. Not me. I dislike waiting enough that I've made quite a few lifestyle choices to avoid it, or at least to mitigate its effect. Ever since I was an ophthalmology resident, I've chosen to live within a 10-minute commute through town to work in my several practices. I don't mind the driving part of commuting, it's the waiting part when the freeway is jammed up solid. When I encounter heavy traffic, I would much rather take a 20-minute detour than wait in a 15-minute backup because it feels like I'm saving time. If I have just a few items to buy and there's a big line at checkout, I'm likely to put the stuff back and return another day. And I've been known to wear my white coat to doctor appointments when the office staff doesn't know me well, in hopes of getting called sooner.

But when I travel on airplanes, there is no way to avoid waiting. I am a complete hostage to the system. Even when everything is running on time, airlines require that passengers must arrive at least an hour before the flight or boarding may be denied. That means that the waiting time starts at an hour and goes up from there. And heaven forbid if there's a delay, when information is meted out by airline personnel in byte-sized increments. During popular travel times, a cancellation might mean several days' extended stay. So I

take along work that I do not expect to complete, or a novel I won't have time to read, just in case I get stuck waiting longer than expected.

So what does that have to do with ballast? In the nautical sense of the term, ballast refers to a heavy, dense material that is carried below the waterline to keep a boat more stable. Most ships use seawater because it is easy to pump it out when you don't need it, and let it back in when you do. Submarines wishing to surface "blow the ballast" with compressed air. Sailboats often use metal ballast because the lateral force of the wind requires a heavy keel to keep the craft upright. In the old days, when merchant vessels used sails, the cargo served as ballast, to be replaced by metal when running empty. The trade-off is that for the extra stability that ballast provides, it takes more energy to push it around.

My personal ballast is the extra stuff I take along on trips, just in case I encounter a long delay. It's usually a little heavy, and it has to fit into the carry-on luggage. It must be replaceable, should it be lost in the seat-back pocket or, rarely, jettisoned in favor of some other cargo. It has to be fairly durable, since the same ballast is usually with me on many consecutive trips. Though it makes my luggage load heavier and takes more energy to haul around, it assures that I don't feel quite so helpless when unavoidable waits occur.

But I realize that I am horribly dated. My solution to the problem has been rendered obsolete. I see my fellow passengers carrying fully charged smartphones. As far as I can tell, they can keep themselves occupied for hours if not days with games, texting, apps and Internet searching. As charging outlets, downloadable books, and wireless connectivity to the Internet proliferate, there will scarcely be a place where you can't use your phone for amusement. And as tablet computers become more prevalent, it might actually be possible to get some serious work done. No need for ballast in the 21st century. As for me? Will I ever jettison my ballast? We'll see.



RICHARD P. MILLS, MD, MPH
CHIEF MEDICAL EDITOR, EYENET