

My Untoppable Eclipse Stories

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This week my podcast is notably shorter than usual. That's because I'm taking a departure from the topics which I normally address on Upsize Your Leadership. Instead, I want to share two humorous incidents with you. Both had to do with a total solar eclipse which I witnessed in western Siberia on August 1, 2009.

I've been thinking about these two stories lately because of all the buzz about this month's solar eclipse here in the U.S. and Canada. Living in the Dallas area, we're right in the path of the event. For the next few weeks, I'm sure, people will be sharing their stories about their experience with the eclipse. But I'm

also rather certain that none of their stories will top the two I'm about to relate. And their stories are also unlikely to be nearly as funny.

I was in Siberia in 2009 to conduct a series of workshops in cities along the Ob River, cities like Novosibirsk, Tomsk, and Barnaul Altai. I delivered these trainings in partnership with the ministries of education in various oblasts (what we would call states) in that part of Russia.

These workshops were five-day events, with a full schedule from nine in the morning until 4:30 in the afternoon. Early in my preparation for the trip, I learned that a total solar eclipse would occur on Wednesday afternoon of the training in Barnaul. I therefore adjusted the curriculum for that week to allow us to dismiss at noon.

Because I was conducting these workshops at the request of ministries of education, we normally conducted them in assembly halls at what the Russians refer to as pedagogical institutes. These schools are the equivalent of teacher's colleges in the U.S. For this particular workshop, about 70 educators would be in attendance.

Wherever I conducted a workshop, the typical day began with an early morning social call on the director of the institute, the person who fills the roll of a dean in American higher education. This was simply a courtesy visit to discuss the day's schedule while enjoying a sumptuous supply of cookies and hot tea.

On Monday, when I arrived for my morning cookies and tea, the director had barely introduced herself before she turned the conversation to the upcoming eclipse. She wanted to be sure that I knew about it. Even more, she wanted assurances that I would dismiss the workshop early

enough on Wednesday for the teachers to get home (none of them owned cars), gather their children, and watch the eclipse as a family.

She kept repeating, "I cannot believe that this is happening!", the excitement in her voice becoming more pronounced every time she said it. "I always dreamed of seeing a total solar eclipse. But living in Russia on the small salary of a teacher, I knew that I would never have enough money to travel to some faraway place to see an eclipse. But NOW . . . now the good Lord is bringing an eclipse to me, to my very town."

Three or four times during the conversation, I confirmed that I had carefully planned to let everyone be on their way home at noon on Wednesday. But her anxieties on the matter were still running high. At noon and again as I was leaving for the day, she stopped me to be sure that we would finish at noon on Wednesday.

Tuesday, when I showed up for cookies and hot tea, she had a newspaper spread out across her monstrous desk, showing the path of the eclipse across Russia and the times of maximum eclipse at various points on the journey. Every time I gave the participants a break that day, she came into the assembly hall to remind me of the noon deadline on Wednesday. She was obviously so excited about the eclipse that she could not contain herself. If her repeated reminders had not been so amusing to me, I would have quickly become quite frustrated by them.

But on Wednesday, she was no longer waiting for a break in the workshop to offer her reminder. She actually came into the session and interrupted my comments on two occasions to be certain that I was still on schedule to be out by noon.

We met the deadline, and actually dismissed about 11:45. I left, went back to the apartment where I was staying, and watched the eclipse from the balcony outside my bedroom. However, nature had a trick to play. By the time that the eclipse reached our location, it had peaked moments before and was just beginning to wane. About one half of one percent of the sun had started to peek out. Not a 100% eclipse, but pretty close.

As I went to the institute Thursday morning, I expected to find the director walking on air. The Lord had brought her a solar eclipse. Instead, what I found was one angry woman. She was cursing. She was throwing pencils and small objects in frustration. She was pounding her fist on the desk. "They promised me a total eclipse," she was shouting, "but they only gave me a partial eclipse."

Then she tossed out a line which I will never forget. She banged her fist against the desk once more and shouted, "The communists are gone, and they are still lying to me." I did not dare laugh and risk offending her, but it took every ounce of strength that I could muster to choke down my laughter.

Earlier in the day, however, I had enjoyed an unbridled laugh about the eclipse. It was en route to the workshop. I rode that morning with my good friend Vladimir Skovorodnikov, who was the minister of education for that part of Russia. I had traveled widely with him both in his own country and all over the U.S. We were close friends. And I was always struck by his intellect, imagination, and tremendous wit.

As soon as I got in the car, he asked, "Well, did you see the eclipse yesterday?"

“Yes,” I replied. “I watched it from the balcony.”

“Oh, my friend,” he responded. “You are one of the most blessed of people. You now have an advantage which no other American can match.”

“How’s that?” I asked.

He answered with a question of his own. “Have you ever been in a conversation that was boring you to tears and you couldn’t find a way to get out of it?” he asked. I nodded in agreement.

“Well,” he said, “in the future when that happens, you wait for a pause in the other person’s remarks, and you ask, ‘Have you ever seen a total solar eclipse in Siberia?’, and of course, their answer will be No.’ At which point you say . . .” – and here, as he went on, he turned his back slightly to me and made a dismissive wave of his hand – “then, why am I even talking to you?’ and you walk away.” He laughed heartily at his own joke, and I laughed even harder.

In the years since, I’ve found myself in a number of conversations which were very much like the one that he described. And I’ve wished time and again that I had the nerve to follow his advice. But I never have.

Dr. Mike Armour is the president and founder of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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