

Fear of Flying

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Just once I would like an air travel adventure to start with an easy departure, but as usual my flight out of Grand Rapids was delayed and I knew I'd have to run to make my connecting flight in Pittsburgh. But, that's nothing new. Over the past few years I have become an airport decathlete, excelling in all of the skills practiced by the frequent air traveler. I can sprint from gate to gate like a track star when necessary, leap unexpected obstructions like a seasoned high jumper, and throw my carry on through an x-ray machine like the most highly skilled discus champion. The hazards of airport navigation have become great, but we all must learn to adapt or be left on the ground.

After a stint as a jet engine mechanic in the Navy I became slightly afraid to fly. The problem was, that once I knew how to fix airplanes I also knew what held them together. There no longer seemed to be enough nuts and bolts keeping all of the parts in place. It didn't help that I also now knew *who* was keeping all of the aircraft aloft.

As the frequency of my air adventures increased, the trepidation with which I faced each new journey began to fade. The noises and bumps made by the plane became routine. I was sure, after all, that the pilot and crew didn't want fall out of the sky any more than I did. On one particularly bone-jarring flight down the Florida coast I realized I had finally closed the door on my fear of flying. While flying through a thunderstorm and the resulting turbulence the plane felt as if it dropped several hundred feet straight down more than once. While the other passengers cried aloud and perfect strangers held hands across the aisle, I took off my glasses and went to sleep.

These days my fears have resurfaced, although they are of a different nature. My discomfort is no longer brought on by the mechanical nature of the aircraft, but by the human nature of my fellow passengers. The squeaks and rattles of the plane do not concern me as much as the way the man in seat 26 D might study his shoes, or by a strange language being whispered between two people in the aisle ahead of me. Even the crew might deserve careful scrutiny. Once in the air I always seem to feel better, although, on my last flight the bell that signals the flight attendant made me jump out of my skin not once- but twice.

So how then do we adjust to the new hazards of air travel? Do we trade in our frequent flier miles for road maps and pit stops? During a 15 hour trip to the east coast on America's finest highways I was

quickly reminded that I am not in my 30's anymore and any ideas of making a trip to Florida by car this year went right out of the window. I will keep to the air, but with the attitude that "When your number's up, your number's up". If there is anything I can do to help the plane stay airborne until it's scheduled to descend, I will gladly volunteer. However, if the wing I can see through the window to the left of me should suddenly part company with the rest of the aircraft I only hope I make the ride down with some dignity. I might even be able to sleep as we spiral toward the ground, knowing that there is a good chance I will survive if my tray table is stowed and my seat back has been returned to the fully upright position.

This afternoon I was asked by the girl at the check-in counter which seat I would like to occupy during my short hop to Pittsburgh. I asked her for the emergency exit row since there is usually better legroom, which she was able to give me. However, she said it was towards the rear of the plane and asked if that would be alright. When I inquired if the seat would be the same distance from the ground as all the others during the flight she just smiled, handed me the ticket, and pointed me towards the metal detectors, armed guards, and x-ray machines.