

Giving Into Fate

By Karel Murray

I have flown about 75,000 miles this year and the worst thing I have had to experience to date relates to delays, cancelled flights and people spilling their breakfast all over my new shirt. All situations that are easily managed and don't even come close to terminating my existence on earth. The hot eggs hurt a bit, but cold water soon diminished that burn! It's amazing how one flight can turn these types of issues into mere inconveniences when faced with the potential of impending death.

Sound ominous...you betcha. One thing I do know...when I pay for a plane ticket, I'm not expecting a roller coaster ride choppy enough to rattle brain matter! On a recent flight to Burlington, Vermont, our plane was buffeted relentlessly by high winds as the jet made its decent to the runway. First it was smooth sailing... the next thing I know, my stomach is trying to lurch out my nose. Unexpected turbulence is what the pilot called it. "Sorry about that... It's just a bit bumpy...please remain in your seats and keep your seat belts securely fastened."

It was the "securely fastened" statement that caught my attention coupled with the gut wrenching plunge the airplane had just completed. It felt like a giant hand had gripped the hull of the vessel and given it one quick, strong shake. Clutching the arm of the seat did not do any good. My stomach still wanted out. A series of hard hitting side winds buffeted the plane. Wings dipped back and forth as if the driver had suddenly released the steering wheel and let the aircraft do whatever it wanted...and it wanted to turn a somersault.

Closing my eyes made the nausea only more intense...the queasiness increasing with every cloud bump. I didn't even know the clouds could be that rough. They sure looked soft from the plane window! As I stared outside the porthole, I could see the shadowed Vermont countryside and surrounding hills. It was as idyllic as all of the travel books indicate. Somehow that didn't comfort me as I imagined a fiery death due to crashing into a scenic farmhouse nestled in brilliant maple trees because of an unexpectedly strong wind shear.

I've heard of this weather related phenomenon before. A subdivision in Lee's Summit, Missouri had dozens of homes damaged in the late nineties due to a quick, high force wind that exploded through the quiet suburb, scattering debris and probably a pet or two in its wake. There was no warning and no funnel cloud. I had been trained since birth to spot a tornado funnel and knew the proper safety escape procedures. But a wind shear just rips in and rips out

without warning. No circular funnel, just a tremendous force that is impossible to combat.

And here we were, right in the middle of several high winds blasting across the Burlington, Vermont airport runway. As I watch from the window, I could see the countryside rise up towards the plane bottom. The pilot was obviously having an extremely difficult time keeping the plane level. Flapping wings, like a child's rattle, was my first clue that the pilot just might want to abort the landing. In fact, a shrill screech from the lady behind me sounded like a four alarm fire alert. Immediately after her yelp died away, the jet surged upwards back into the circling flight pattern. I notice two other planes attempt to land, but then return back to the relevant safety of the open airspace. The lurching, back jarring plunges of the aircraft seemed to bring a pall over the passengers. I'm not sure, but I think the woman who screamed resorted to quiet whimpers into her husband's armpit.

And here I was...all alone. I do remember thinking..."So...you wish for your husband to be in the seat beside you so you both can die in a crash?" I sounded just like my Polish grandmother, slapping sense back into my head. Of course, I shouldn't wish for my loved one to share this uncertain moment...but having his hand to crush would have been welcomed. Instead, I chose to clutch my computer in my lap. Heaven forbid I should wreck it now...it's only three weeks old!

Breathing deeply through my nose, I managed to hang onto my lunch and sanity. I realized that there was nothing I could do about the situation and we would either make it safely onto the runway, fly to another airport and I'd have to drive back to the city where my engagement was being held, or the plane would crash. Since I wasn't piloting the darn thing, there was nothing else to do but hang on.

It helps that another airline pilot was sitting across the aisle from me. His quiet "Whoa, Big Boy" utterances made me grin in spite of myself. He sounded just like an old west cowboy, riding a bucking bronco, anticipating its undulating turns, and loving every minute of it. If he wasn't worried...I shouldn't be. However, if he had started screaming, then all bets were off!

We did manage to land on the second try. The cowboy tag along pilot mischievously smiled and announced an exuberant "Nailed it!" to the flight attendant.

Did I re-live my life in those uncertain split seconds? Nope. I just let my anxiety go and accepted what fate had to offer. That's when I realized that I had no regrets in my life. If I did expire in a plane crash, I know I have lived and loved to

the fullest of my ability. And that is all that life can ask of me. My husband might say that he wishes I cooked a meal more often than once a year, but heck...in the scheme of things; it is such a small issue!

I know these next few months will have their unexpected, exhilarating, and scary moments. It's called life. I just need to remember to keep my seat belt securely fastened!

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