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FLYING ON FAITH

"You define a good flight by negatives: you didn't get highjacked, you didn't crash, you didn't throw up, you weren't late, you weren't nauseated by the food.

So, you are grateful"

- Paul Theroux

There haven't been that many good flights this December. Not around Chicago, where we are tied to memories of fatal crashes. There were five this year. The last involving another American Eagle flight that crashed in another field, this time in North Carolina.

If flying is defined as boredom punctuated by seconds of sheer terror, we can now add a new concern. What aren't they telling us?

The American Eagle flight that went down last week had made four previous unscheduled landings due to engine malfunctions. No one boarding the doomed flight knew that history. No one asked.

Flying has become a kind of ritual. We seem always to duplicate our previous experience. But this month there has been some concern. More than ordinary concern.

We take so much for granted when we fly and we have all the facts we'll ever need. We know that the ride to the airport is far more dangerous than any flight, anywhere, unless we're trying to land in Cairo, Egypt during the lunch hour when the air traffic controllers all take lunch at the same time.

Deep down, of course, it's a head-heart thing. We rationalize away the fear by knowing just how safe we are up in the air. But our heart still tells us that it could happen to us. What if?

Should the passengers boarding American Eagle have known that their plane had a history of engine problems? Or is this far too impractical?

When we next hurtle through space at five or six hundred miles an hour, up at 33,000 feet do we deserve to feel secure that the equipment we are flying has not previously malfunctioned? Are computers sophisticated enough to offer us a "safety history" of the aircraft we will be flying the following day?

They are. But you see the problem is, no one asks. No one asks to see the plane's flight record before boarding. No one asks the airline reservationist how to get such information. It is just assumed that we are not entitled to know the history of the machinery that will hurtle us through space.

We accept so much of the flying ritual. We accept treatment that we would never put up with from a less exotic business.

We strap ourselves into seats that have been intentionally designed to meet the revenue goals of the airline instead of the curvature of the human spine. We are provided the minimum number of toilets allowed by law, allowing for more seats. We put up with a new generation of planes that recycle stale air instead of providing more expensive fresh air. Air quality in the skies is decreasing, it is not improving.

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Read the statistics regarding the quality of air in First Class versus Coach on your average transatlantic flight. First Class passengers receive approximately double the ration of fresh air. No wonder they get off the planes feeling refreshed, while those in cattle class complain of frequent respiratory distress.

Several airlines, keeping right up to date with current health trends, have noticed that there are those in the medical community who seem to think that smoking is not entirely beneficial. So they have started to ban smoking aboard even their longest flights.

But still, a majority of airlines permit smoking aboard their aircraft on international routes. And so nonsmokers breathe in their poorly recycled air and flight attendants, low in seniority, are forced to work the putrid aisles of the smoking section. And the rest of us silently pray that they don't start a fire in the black night halfway across the Atlantic Ocean.

There is a good deal about the ritual of air travel that doesn't make any sense. Did you ever notice how they ring that little Marshall Field's elevator bell after the plane has leveled out at cruising altitude? The pilot comes on and explains that you are "free to move about the cabin". I've been on a number of international flights this year just about everyone on board starting moving about the cabin. On one Alitalia flight, it appeared that an in-aisle soccer match was about to break out. Here we are above the clouds, flying miles up at speeds of hundreds of miles an hour and the pilot says we can walk around. But after we've landed, and we're safely on the ground, taxiing at about one mile an hour to the gate, the flight attendant comes by to be sure we're safely strapped in to our seats.

The flying experience carries a price tag. Two years ago, I told you that the airlines had settled their case involving years of price-fixing. American, Continental, Delta, USAir, TWA, and Northwest have been involved in a long legal process that seems finally to have come to an end. After flying for years at artificially "fixed" prices in total disregard of the law, the class action suit has been settled and flyers who filled out the appropriate forms will be getting their refunds no later than December 31st. This all sounds like a happy ending, a victory for consumers right?

Not exactly. If you filed form A, meaning you flew at least once between January 1st, 1988 and June 30th, 1992, you'll get \$73 in airline coupons.

If you were a good customer of the airlines and took at least five round trip flights during this period and paid at least \$2500, you should have filed form B. You will be rewarded with an extra \$6 in coupons, or \$79.

The really big winners in all of this, in fact the only winners, are the really frequent flyers. If you flew over a million miles on any of the airlines between 1988 and June 1992, you will receive \$2,376. If you spent over \$10 million on air travel, your coupons will be worth \$23,107. And if you were in the air enough to spend over \$200 million, you, my friend, have won the lottery. You will be receiving coupons worth \$460,743.

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The coupons can be used in conjunction with sale fares and can be cashed in with your travel agent when you pay for your ticket. The coupons can't be sold, but they can be used by members of your immediate family. There are 22 blackout dates in 1995 when the coupons can't be used.

So let's everyone be a bit more tolerant of the airlines this year. . Sure they'll have to add a few more seats in coach and cut back a bit on meal service. But how else are they going to pay for all of those coupons they're sending out this month?

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