

Encountering Death

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My flight from London Heathrow to New York JFK on April 2, 2004 almost didn't make it. The aircraft, British Airways Flight 183, nearly came down in flames, killing all 220 passengers on board. We took off dead on time at 20 hours, and all seemed normal. As always, everyone seemed to be minding their own business – reading, watching a movie, listening to music, or going straight to sleep.

The flight seemed the same as the hundreds of others I've flown in the last thirty years. The security check had been thorough enough to assure everyone of the absence of Al Qaeda operatives with plans and the means to bring us down. No, it seemed a perfectly safe, smooth and secure flight, until the unexpected happened.

I was not originally on the flight. I had changed to it at the last minute in Heathrow, when my flight from Entebbe, Uganda arrived late, giving me less than thirty minutes to rest before connecting on to New York. I wanted more time to stretch out, overcome my chronic motion sickness without medication, pick up a novel, and make some phone calls to friends in the city. There were three available flights in five hours, and I chose the last one. My three colleagues on the Entebbe flight, who had been at the same retreat with me in Jinja, Uganda, went on with the original flight.

For a moment, between phone calls, it crossed my mind that if anything tragic were to happen with either my flight or theirs there would be the all-too-familiar human response to see the fatal hand of destiny in it. "Isn't it amazing that he changed his flight and wasn't with them?" Some would ask.

The flight had been smooth, until two hours to New York City. The announcement that woke me up pierced through the dark business-class cabin with lightening shock: "Ladies and Gentlemen, this is the Pilot speaking. This is an emergency announcement. I repeat, this is an emergency announcement..."

I was sitting in the upper deck, right in front of the cockpit, so I knew this could be no hijacking. Perhaps a hostage had been taken in the back of the aircraft? Or some intelligence information had just come in about a bomb on board? Perhaps we had even run out of fuel because someone forgot to refuel the aircraft at Heathrow airport? It was none of these.

The Pilot continued: "We have detected smoke in one of the engines and have had to shut off the engine. There're vibrations in the middle of the aircraft, which we are closely tracking. Please remain seated, bring your seats to an upright position, and fasten your seat

belts. We will do our best to stabilize the aircraft, but we may have to make an emergency landing. The cabin crew will show you the steps to take in the event of an emergency landing..."

It was clear we were in harm's way. A young blond woman who sat three seats next to me shot up to go to the toilet. She looked half-asleep, wore blue jeans and had long hair all over her face. The cabin crew quickly blocked her and gently told her to sit down for now. In a minute, three female cabin crew were by her side. We, the men, knew (or thought we knew) to look away.

I didn't want to think of what the young distraught woman needed help with. It wouldn't have been fair, for weren't we all distraught in our own ways anyway, some under a thin cover of dignified silence, and others with closed eyes or some such inward-centered response. I wanted to focus on something usefully distracting, like the "Me and Daddy Show" at the Bronx Zoo that I was to attend with my son the next day. That thought refused to stay, and my mind wandered to the idea of last moments of life, and then the very idea and meaning of life itself.

Jinja in Uganda, where I had been, is the source of the River Nile, the longest river in the world. At that source, two historic monuments flank the majestic and lively river. One is where Mahatma Gandhi requested his ashes to be buried. The other is the putative spot where John Hanning Speke stood when he came upon the Nile's origin. The idea of remembering the lives and deaths of two great spirits through a river fascinated me for an instant. Rivers are in themselves not eternal, but there's something about their flow and contours that defy the cycle and rhythms of life and death. They seem to go on forever.

The Pilot's voice came on the intercom once again: "Ladies and Gentlemen, we have turned off one of the cooling systems... We will begin our descent for an emergency landing in thirty minutes. Please remain calm and seated with your seat belts fastened. We are doing everything possible for your safety. The cabin crew will demonstrate the exit procedures..." We went through the correct sitting position, where and how to head out of the emergency exits, why we should leave behind our hand luggage, etc. The heat was on.

A man sitting next to me, on my right, an African-American, who had barely eaten or drunk anything on the flight called one of the cabin crew and asked for a glass of wine. He was refused, gently, but offered water, which he took in one straight gulp. He asked for a second glass. I looked at him with a smile, trying strangely to reassure him that all will be well, but in truth I was as scared to die as he might have been.

I started to perspire, both from the heat and the stress of knowing that death might be lurking just a few seconds or minutes away. An older British man sitting next to me, on my left, must have noticed my fear, and he said: "Thank God we are not landing on water." I found that reassuring and didn't want to know if he knew what he was talking about. I asked one of the crew members passing by: "Are we landing on water?" "No" she said. I was doubly reassured and thanked the British man sitting next to me. In moments of stress or impending tragedy, every small act of life assurance is a gift of miraculous proportions, I thought.

It reminded me of the words of my good friend Aseghedech from Eritrea when I told her that I had found Jinja one of the most beautiful places on earth. She had said: "Ugandans survived Idi Amin's slaughter because their land is so beautiful that they had every reason to hope and to live. It's not for nothing that their land, Uganda, was called the Pearl of Africa." There's a popular saying that "where there is life there's hope." In moments of trial and triumph, perhaps the reverse is more accurate: "where there's hope there's life." Hope may not prevent death from laying its icy hands on us, but without hope the spirit goes out even before death arrives. I tried to be hopeful.

I remembered too that the human spirit could indeed rise to the level of defiance in the face of imminent death. Charles James Fox, the 18th Century indefatigable Tory politician for example, had said, "I die happy", mocking death as he lay dying. Perhaps a more evocative quote is from Lytton Strachey, the biographer, who on his deathbed dismissed death beyond measure with the immortal words: "If this is dying, then I don't think much of it." Equally inspiring was Kwame Nkrumah who said something to the effect that when death finally comes knocking at our door, it would be sorely disappointed, for we would have already sacrificed our lives to the struggle.

I had no such heroic thoughts of my own to defy death. Rather, I simply wished that if I lived, I would live life to the fullest in all ways possible. I would not focus on just one thing. I would smell a flower every morning, stop to marvel at the mystery of the ant, patiently smile at the rain, slowly eat lunch without the daily newspaper, commute to work and home with a walkman, courageously learn to swim, and say a simple hi to the homeless wherever and whenever I find them. I would swim the full breath of the river of life and learn to gently go with its flow now and then.

Of course, I also called on familiar spirits, starting with my grandmother, Naana, who was the first feminist I knew. Naana, a hunter, enjoyed life to the fullest, and said to me when I contemplated life as a priest: "My precious," she said in Twi, "remember that you were born to live. If being a priest would let you live life to its fullest, then be a priest." I dropped the idea. My mother who was more diplomatic said no less: "Perhaps you can be a priest who brings joy to all who cross your path, but you must yourself have joy in full measure to share it." These personal thoughts and sentiments kept me sane and going.

In due course, we commenced our descent and the terrifying experience of two hours heightened. What kind of landing would it be? What if it crashed? We had ten minutes to go, the longest time of the seven-hour flight. The bright lights of New York City lit up the sky, evoking memories of September 11th and imaginings of what and how the last minutes of the victims of that horrific attack must have felt.

In the final minutes of that entire experience, I closed my eyes, and found myself saying a little prayer to Saint Thomas. I used to be called Thomas in my devoutly Catholic days. Once a Catholic, always a Catholic, I thought. My atheist faith was weak. Death was near, and I chose to think of it spiritually. A little prayer won't hurt, I rationalized, after all who knows what's up there? This reminded me of the delightful feminist joke: "God is coming and, boy, is she pissed!"

I opened my eyes, looked out the window, and saw the airport runway. We were seconds perhaps to the ground, and on both sides of the aircraft tens of fire-fighting trucks and ambulances stood ready to save lives.

Somehow, the feeling of danger evaporated as we embraced the earth. Then the entire aircraft broke into thunderous applause as we hit the ground in what must count as one of the softest landings of all time.

Death had spared us, or rather the human spirit had won out, for the crew had demonstrated the most abiding courage and professional calm their training and experience could not even have instilled. They seemed superhuman. We were safe.

When it was time to go out, the crew stood in a line by the door, and one by one, we came out shaking their hands. A little girl of about my son's age hugged the pilot and said: "God bless you." The adults around her laughed nervously.

Finally, I got to immigration, and my encounter with the immigration officer who processed me nearly broke my new resolve to smile at all life, good or bad. When I said hello, he said nothing. I was used to that. He took my passport and immigration forms, and spent ten good minutes leafing through them. Then he asked: "Why have you come to this country?" "I live and work here," I said. "What do you mean you live here? Where's your residence card," he asked. "I don't have one," I said. "I'm here on a work visa, which is on page 29 of my old passport. I work at the Ford Foundation."

He looked irritated, and continued to ask the same questions twice in a row. I did my best not to show my exasperation, for I knew he could throw me out on the flimsiest of "Homeland Security" grounds. I smiled instead. He fingerprinted me twice, photographed me, stamped my passport, and handed it back to me. I said "Thank you." Again, no response. I walked away, sure that this particular human being will never get it. The oneness of all humankind is an alien concept to him.

In every situation, no matter how much you've suffered, someone or the other will find a reason to be mean-spirited, I thought. But that's not the important point. What counts is that I've a new lease on life. If logic and the statistics of probability are anything to go by, this should mean that another close brush with death would not occur soon.

The day after is always for reflection. What's the lesson of the experience? How would the memory of it change my life? Today, after hearing a blow-by-blow account of my experience, an American friend suggested lightheartedly that I consider seeing a therapist. I'm not sure, for the word "Therapist" has always frightened me ever since I deciphered its alternative meaning if split between the first and last two syllables: "The-rapist." So, I'll settle for the simple but powerful lesson the experience taught me, which is to always fully embrace the joys and beauty of life in all its forms. I've sworn to do just that.