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Why Fly?

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1. Two Fathers, One Question

The only time I have seen my father agreeing with a priest was when he and Father Elijah shook heads as I, seventeen and proud of my first purchase of any mode of rebellious transportation, unpacked a paraglider on the lawn.

What shocked the rationalist liberalism of my father as much as the grace-soaked vision of Father Elijah was that any man – and usually it is men – might willingly entrust his life to a simple bundle of fabric and string. Father Elijah, who had lost an arm in a pre-conversion motorcycle accident: “My spirit too transports me upward, but *my* safety and protection are in less ephemeral hands.” My father: “Why does this piece of human capital, fragile as porcelain and diligently nurtured, hang by string over chasms of thousands of feet or rely for safe passage on the poorly understood aerodynamics of soft fabric and the vicissitudes of turbulent air currents?”

The paraglider is the simplest foot-launched, non-powered gliding device. It looks like a parachute elongated and curved by a fish-eye lens. It weighs around 30 pounds, fits in a rucksack, and carries its pilot upwards on the various aerial currents: thermal, ridge and wave. Of all the gliding disciplines, it triumphs by its simplicity but pays for this in a low top speed – of around 27 miles per hour for the raciest machines. The *game* of the paraglider is set largely by the constraints of his vehicle: to go as far as the diurnal air currents will allow, starting with sharp morning thermals, travelling through the rough and tumble air of a summer afternoon, and gliding gently on westerly slopes into setting sun, as forests and fields return the day’s heat to the sky. If you are how you travel, then your vehicle, your earthly carapace, sets much of the agenda for your life.

The paraglider that had so alarmed the two fathers soon became an indispensable part of my hikes into the mountains. As in my pre-flying days, I would take the family dog on my outings. The first serious flight was from the Pointe d’Ireuse, a rounded north-westerly slope in the limestone foothills of the Alps. I launched without a thought for the dog; he would see me descending and would surely make his own way down. But the faithful animal waited at the summit, the last place his previously sensibly earthbound master had been seen for sure.

On the next flight, from the neighbouring Mont d’Hirmentaz, I turned immediately after launch and called to the dog. Now he saw what I had become, and tried to jump off the grassy slope and into the air to meet me. He did this all the way down the mountain, jumping to try to join me, jumping and tumbling, leaping when the terrain steepened, straining at gravity’s lead. But his trajectory was always outwards, to the air where he could see me, perpendicular to the slope and not downwards, to the foot of the mountain. The canine reaction was puzzled, earthbound, frustrated, aiming at flight, just as the attitude that for a long time typified mine in earthbound moments. Launch and flight relieved a hunger.

As in all attempts to explain behaviour, the question of the two fathers has an answer from the outside – causes and effects – and another from the inside –the particular resonance to the practitioner of flying in this way.

The cause and effect story will be very familiar. We glide, hang-glide, paraglide, microglide and generally take avoidable risks in flying machines for all the general and unedifying reasons that lead humans – usually men and boys – to habitually risk all that is valuable. Recreational aviation, under its veneer of counter-culture coolness, is endlessly and enjoyably competitive. How far did *you* fly today? And your own personal best? And your max gain? And if you have been grounded, can you find a good reason that allows you to preserve some self-regard? Recreational flying is for the literal minded, the person for whom the meritocratic and hierarchical imperative of rising by your own efforts is practicable only when the rising is measured in hundreds of feet per minute.

The French vulgate renders the flying spark from Job as: "man engenders sorrow as the eagle soars to the sky". Flight, for both the eagle and the spark, heightens the contrast with man's state; if you envy the soaring of the eagle, do not even bother to ask why your lot is sorrow. The recreational aviator soars to join the eagles. I think of John Berger's [1] single mother of the early-industrial age in the second volume of the *Pig Earth* trilogy. Her son's father had indeed been born unto sorrow, a Swedish migrant in a metal-working Savoyard valley, killed in an industrial accident. A generation later, their son becomes European hang-gliding champion and takes his mother soaring like the eagles at weekends. These moments heal her Jobian sorrow.

An Amazonian tribe (the one that is the source of all anecdotal proof of one's pet sociology) is said – I have this on good authority – to offer the greatest social rewards for catching a lizard so shy and so fast that unusual patience and quickness are needed to return to the village with one in the pouch. Young men will stand still over a rock for days in the hope of proving their virtues. The lizard hunt is a good discriminator. Similarly, Antony Woodward [1] explains his own passion for risky aviation:

"But what is the most important thing? Because flying has such disarmingly specific minimum proficiency requirements – do things right, I live; do them wrong, I don't – a flight that I return from safely is a perfect, unarguable parcel of proof of being in control and on top of things."

The lizard hunt, the microlight and my own paraglider – from the outside they all function in the same way: instruments of social hierarchy, arenas in which virtue can flourish. If you are to become how you travel, the game of your journey is made better for being selective.

Turning journeys into people

"You are how you travel" [1] is a simple corollary of the cliché that life is a journey. All the dimensions in which we journey can, to varying degrees, substitute each other. Our pilgrim's progress through business careers, up political poles, through academic fields, our tourism of the exotic – all these stand largely indistinguishable, from the outside at least, from the lizard hunt or the chase after summer thermals.

I think of Roger, gym teacher in a small town in Haute-Savoie (just down the ridge from John Berger's hero), almost retired, his children grown and his hip just replaced. Roger is as much king of the castle as anyone I know, because he has tamed *his* thermal – the one that licks the ridge above *his* chalet – as no one else has. He knows its twists and odd turns; how its character changes with the weather; how to grip it when it is tight and dry, or luxuriate in its wide evening softness. He knows from close shaves – willingly recounted – to avoid it in the south wind. He has domesticated the thermal above his home. When I return to Haute-Savoie, I look

out for a speck above the ridge even as the aeroplane is landing at Geneva airport. When I spot Roger, I feel admiration, excitement, anticipation, and envy.

Two things distinguish the modes of travel that turn journeys into people: their impact on the world and how they appear to practitioners from within. There is a hope in this. Can journeys with slighter impacts substitute for those that are more scarring? Two spheres of modern civil life – business and leisure tourism – offer us the most accessible arenas for the exercise of the social virtues of judgement, courage and self-regard; both suffer heavy ecological and cultural footprints. The substitution can occur.

I think of Hernando, an early business associate with a strong macho streak. I had invited him to the Alps to discuss the proposed venture and to meet Olivier, a possible associate and himself a paraglider aficionado. The flying conditions were frustratingly good – far too good – to be engaged in a business discussion. By the second day, Olivier and I proposed a break and suggested that Hernando come with us to the launch ridge. He was quiet and perturbed. By the time we were at the top of the ridge, he could no longer contain himself: "Don't think I haven't noticed what you are doing; this is a sick initiation rite. I am not flying off. I am not cowardly. And this has nothing to do with my aptitude as a businessman. If we were in Venezuela, I'd be walking you through my uncle's crocodile farm at this moment." Of course, Hernando's machismo had made him paranoid. But the parody of paranoia reveals an underlying truth: gliding could have been an alternative vehicle for the virtues commonly exercised in business. Arch McArthur, corporate mogul turned venture capitalist, sports jock, endlessly competitive: "Venture finance is better than golf." Can we make non-powered flight better than both, upgrade beyond premium economy or business?

The wise range widely, close-by

Just as the appropriate response to short lives is to hurry slowly, so the best response to overcrowding, mass affluence and destruction by mass tourism is to travel expansively but in our own gardens; range widely close-by. If you are how you travel, how can six billion simultaneous journeys avoid gridlock? The efficiency of a means of transport should be measured by how little you need to travel to still make it a journey; maximise journeys per mile, not miles per hour.

To this end, the insider's answer to the question of the two fathers – why fly? – is as important as that of the outsider. How does recreational flight resonate with our predicament and our nature? How can the most complete journey of a lifetime be sixty local miles under canvas rather than the trip up the million rungs of corporate success or over the thousands of miles that culminate in the 387 steps to Machu Picchu?

Trips worthy of being called journeys must provide opportunity for virtue. Resourcefulness, judgement, courage and luck must all play their part; temptation must be resisted, false friends identified; skill, analysis and technique must all make a difference. Battle, alliance, rest, fear, thirst, heat, discomfort, reflection and just a few moments of lucidity have to find their place. The tales of journeys, whether of Odysseus or Kerouac, of Christian or Citizen Kane, set and motivate the scene for the particular expression of these ingredients.

From Nowhere to the Middle of Nowhere is unpowered flight's answer to the road movie. John Sylvester, gifted climber, paraglider and risk-taker takes Alan Cox, his buddy film-maker, on a ten day trip across the Western Himalayan foothills. John flies a tandem glider and Alan, neophyte, films John, the sky, the landscape and himself (he has a small video camera mounted on a long pole in front of the pilot and passenger). The immensity of the Himalayan background provides a constant reminder of the isolation and fragility of the expedition. John, with the

simplicity of the virtuoso, calmly comments on the aerological and topological twists and turns while Alan, usually silent, oscillates between expressions of ecstasy, awe and terror. Most journeyers by paraglider combine the two attitudes of John and Alan, occasionally finding moments of fluidity and mastery but more often finding an exciting boundary between astonishment and control.

My own greatest journey under a paraglider was on the occasion of the second and last Chablais bivouac (a competition of my invention). The rules were simple: to take-off from the ridges above Lake Geneva at the start of the first anti-cyclone of July, and to run with the anti-cyclonic winds, first south, then east and north again before the storms. The goal was to trace the biggest loop that the chosen weather system would allow – six days of flying were expected. Four of us started. Xavier, by a very long way the most skilled among us, rapidly outran us but got trapped by an unusually persistent north wind in the deep and turbulent Chamonix valley. Olivier and I were lucky and ran south for longer; we continued over eight days and nights.

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One of our nights was spent with Père Louis (a third father), who had broken with the Church and taken with him the belfry and his housekeeper. Early next morning, eager to leave before the priest opened another head-numbing white wine, I asked him for his address. With some ceremony he gave me a postcard showing Isaiah on a rocky path, captioned “longue est la route qui monte”. Longer and harder for him than us, despite our forty-pound packs, I thought. On our second night we had landed low in the Arve valley, the centre of John Berger’s early industrial metallurgical tragedies. We slowly, ploddingly, made our way to the plateaux above. Yes, a tall man with bright wide eyes had landed there the day before. So Xavier was a whole day ahead already ... we must press on despite the late hour to the summit above. We fought our way up for several hours dealing with heat, crumbling rock, lost paths and the relentless weight of the packs ... the burden, the earth-boundness. We were racing the setting sun; would there be any paraglider (or insect) bearing convection left in the air by the time we could reach a place from which we could launch?

The memory of the flight that followed still fills me with wonder. We scraped just a few tens of feet over the launch, enough to race to the limestone cliffs behind. There the martins, out for their evening meal of insects caught in thermal draughts, showed us the way to the top of the ridge. As we followed it south, the convection falling off, we startled a group of ibix who cantered down the scree slopes setting off small avalanches of rock. No great distance was covered, but the long stony road up had been amply rewarded: a good portion of luck, a little skill, understanding and persistence, all permitted by the overall project of the Chablais bivouac.

2. An Answer for the Fathers

Just the other day, an email pinged: “Subject: Catastrophe”. It was from Claire, a long-time flying and ski-touring partner. A visceral dread spread through me. Almost exactly a year before, an email with the same label reached me during a business negotiation. I had been ensconced and safe in the Sunnyvale Sheraton, next to Lockheed Martin’s secret, vast and ominously shaped

Silicon Valley aeroplane hangars. The catastrophe announced in the previous year's email was the death of Claire's husband and two other friends in an avalanche. So I immediately interpreted a 'catastrophe' email from Claire, at the start of the Alpine flying season, as a harbinger of unbearable news. Who? Which friend? Let it not be ... . To my relief, the subject was the outcome of the first round of the French presidential elections.

Fabrice, poor man, still finds no relief. He witnessed his friend and paragliding pupil, a gifted athlete, swerve into the steep slopes at the top of the Tournette as he tried to keep up with the more experienced Fabrice. The impact must have knocked him out. He slid, gathering speed, tumbling, wrapping himself in his glider. Fabrice watched from the air above. He saw the bundle of rag and flesh bounce onwards as the steep slope became 2000 ft feet of unbroken cliff. Fabrice has tried to fly again, but his imagination will not allow it; it now takes uncontrolled paths back to the catastrophe at every prompt.

The risks of catastrophe are present: around one death per five thousand practitioners per year. By comparison, the Health and Safety Executive's Major Hazards Assessment Unit has guidelines to block development projects that it judges to be forty times less risky than paragliding, at five deaths per million inhabitants per year. Is it wise to subject oneself to such risk? Should the Major Hazards Assessment Unit confront the recreational flight community and help the two fathers with their pleading? Pascal balanced the remotest risk of damnation against the benefit of earthly pleasure and chose to do what he thought he could to avoid damnation. Three hundred years on, the sanctity of life applies to *this life* and not the next, so should similar caution be exercised against the avoidable risks of losing life and committing sacrilege?

It is now four years since the last Chablais bivouac. I have married and have two daughters. I run a business that in some part depends on me. I still paraglide, but in a different spirit: hiking with a pack over Scottish hills, opportunistically soaring a ridge; or back in my old alpine haunts, mostly keeping to smooth air and well-remembered itineraries. And when the air does get rough, or an old instinct fails me as I try to control the glider, I think of Pascal's wager and fly to calmer air.

Would I paraglide now if I had not done so during the twelve years that I played this particular version of the lizard-hunt game? Perhaps not. But was it unwise to play it at all? Measures of risk are always tricky; quite apart from statistical technicalities, they require one to construct an inevitably theoretical and contestable counterfactual. The risk that young men take paragliding is the *difference* in the probability of catastrophe between this activity and what they would otherwise do. The one death per five thousand practitioners is an exaggeration of the risk of paragliding if the alternative can also be deadly. Initiation, qualification and jostling are inescapable; there will always be a group that derives the greatest pleasure in the exercise of skills whose absence entails serious accident. Recreational flight occupies a niche that will not disappear. Pierre was a genial pilot, a chef at the inn down the valley. It was in taking a large motorcycle fast around a blind bend that he died. If only he had been flying instead.

John Adams' [2] work on risk confirms the thought that an individual's propensity to take risks is largely fixed. So the question of the two fathers is the wrong one; not 'why hang so precariously?' but rather 'why this way rather than that?' So a few hundred square miles can generate a lifetime of journeys. If you are how you travel, remember to maximise your journeys per mile, and only then aim to ramp your miles per life.

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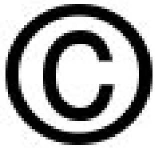

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