# A gospel according to Sam

Richard Bach

An old guru surely must have said it to a disciple ten thousand years ago. “You know, Sam, there will never live anyone who will ever own anything more than his own thoughts. Not people, not places, not things will we ever keep for possessions through vast times. Walk a little while with them we can, but soon or late we’ll each take our own true possession—what we’ve learned, how we think—and go separately around our lonely turnings.”

“Ah, so,” Sam must have said, and written it all on lotus bark.

What was it then, these thousands of years after that truth was written, that I should feel sad, signing papers to trade away a biplane that had become a part of my life? There was no question that it had to be done. My new home is edged on three sides by water, on the fourth by a high-density area. The airport, without a “control tower,” thanks be, is nevertheless all hard-surface runway, is all buttered glass for the biplane to land upon, concrete strips poured into a jungle of oak trees without a single field for landing should an engine fail on takeoff. I moved nine hundred miles from the place where the biplane was at home, and the longer I left her in the hangar the worse it was; she fell to the mercy of house-hunting sparrows and cord-hungry mice. There was no choice, if I loved that airplane and wished her to live in the sky, but to trade her to someone who would fly her well and often. Why was the moment that I signed the papers such a sad moment?

Perhaps because I remembered the six years we had flown together. I remembered the dawn in Louisiana when everything went suddenly wrong, when all of a moment she had to fly after an impossible hundred-foot ground roll, or be torn apart by a dike of earth. She flew. She had never lifted off so quickly before, she never did since, but it happened that one time—she touched the dike and flew.

I remembered the day of the handkerchief pickup, barnstorming in Wisconsin, when I had flown her hard into solid ground that I thought was only grass, slamming her propeller a hundred miles per hour into the dirt, smashing a wing, tearing a wheel loose. She didn’t crush into a ball; that instant, she bounced off the ground, turned into the wind, and eased down into the shortest, softest landing we ever made together. Twenty-five times the propeller blades hit the ground, and instead of flipping on her back or cartwheeling to splinters, the biplane bounced and flew to that marshmallow featherdown landing.

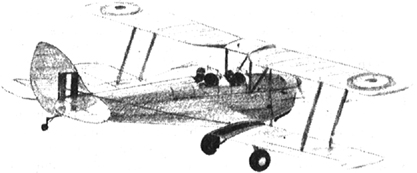
I remember the hundreds of passengers we had flown from cow pastures, who had never in their lives seen a farm from the air until the biplane and I came along to give them the chance, three dollars the ride.

It was sad to part with that airplane, in spite of knowing that one never owns anything, because that flying was finished for me now, because a full good time of my life was finished and done.

The airplane I took in trade is an 85-horsepower Clip-Wing Cub. A completely different personality from the biplane, light as thirty feet of spruce-framed Dacron; that doesn’t even blink at the concrete; that lifts me from takeoff to a thousand feet over the trees in one length of the runway. It flies aerobatics happily that the biplane never could honestly enjoy.

Still it was all rationalization, still I felt a gray melancholy, a wistful sadness that the biplane and I had parted and that it was my fault.

It happened one day, after a practice of slow rolls out over the sea, that I realized a simple fact that most people discover who have to sell an airplane. I learned the fact that every aircraft is two separate life-forms, not just one. The objective frame, the steel and spars, is one airplane. But the subjective, the airplane with which adventures have been shared, with which we forge this intense personal bond, is another machine entirely. This machine, flying, is our breathing past, is as truly our own as thought itself. It can’t be sold. The man whose name is now on the registration papers of the biplane does not own the biplane that I do, that one hushing down through dusk to a summer hayfield in Cook, Nebraska, wind signing in her wires, engine a soft windmill, gliding over the road at the edge of the hay. He doesn’t own the sound of Iowa fog changing to raindrops on the top wings, pomming down on the drum-cloth of the lower wings to wake me, asleep by the ashes of last night’s campfire. The new owner didn’t buy the delight-terror cries of young lady passengers at Queen City, Missouri, at Ferris, Illinois, at Seneca, Kansas, who found that steep turns in an old biplane feel the same as stepping off the roof of the barn.



That biplane will always be mine. He will always keep his own Cub. I learned this from the sky as well as Sam from his guru, and it was no longer necessary to be sad.