# Help I am a prisoner in a state of mind

Richard Bach

Something must have gone wrong at the very first, when I was learning to fly. I remember that I had a very difficult time believing that these little machines actually lift up off the ground; that one minute they are all solid on the earth like a pool table or an automobile or a bright-fabric hot-dog stand and the next minute they are in the air, and you can stand beneath them at the airport fence and they go right over you and there is nothing at all connecting them to the ground, nothing there at all.

It was hard to grasp that, to take it in. I’d walk around an airplane, touch it, knock on it, rock it a little bit by the wingtip, and it merely stood there: See, student? Nothing up my sleeves. No gimmicks, no tricks, no hidden wires. It’s real magic, student. I happen to be able to fly.

I couldn’t believe it. Maybe I still don’t believe it, today. But the point is that there was something spooky going on, eerie and mystical and otherworldly, and maybe that’s how I got myself walled into this corner and now I’m trapped in here and can’t get out.

It’s all gone worse, there’s nothing about flying that I can take for granted, there is nothing there that is common and everyday. I cannot just drive down to the airport and step into my airplane and start the engine and take off and navigate somewhere and land and let it go at that. I would like very much to do this. I want to do this desperately. I envy the pilots I see who casually hop into their machines and go flying out on business or charters or instructing, or the ones who fly for sport and don’t have to make such a big thing about it. But I’m a prisoner in this state of mind that sees flight so all-fired awesome and cosmic that it won’t let me do the simplest things at an airport without insisting that stars are changed in their course because I do them.

Like … look. I come out to fly, and before I’m even out of the car, before I’m even in sight of the field, I look at the sign AIRPORT and it sets me off. AIRPORT. A port of the air, as a seaport is a port of the sea … And I think about the little ships of the air sailing through the sky to this one port of all the possible ports that they could go to, choosing this one place, now, to return to earth. Touching down at this island of grass that has been waiting all special and patient for them here, and then taxiing in and being tied to their moorings, rocking gently in the wind as little ships rock in their harbors.

I’m not even there yet, I’m just seeing the airport sign, and maybe a Cessna 172 off in the distance, hushing down final approach, disappearing behind the trees of the roadside foreground onto what I know is a large level place for landing. Where did that Cessna come from, and where is he going? What storms and adventures has that pilot faced in his time, and his airplane? Perhaps many adventures, perhaps few, but they’ve been out in that vast tremendous sky somewhere, and they’ve been changed by it and now they’ve come from it to this one little harbor, the very port of the air that I’ll see the moment I turn this last corner.

I can’t just say “airport,” like that, simply, and go on to the rest of a sentence. It is always “airport … airport …” and I get going on it that way and either make the wrong turn or run off the road or frighten some innocent person pulling out of the gas station. It’s such an exciting place, an airport, that if I dare to stop and think about it or even use the word, the chances of having a routine flight are pretty well out the window before I even stop the car.

Car stopped at last, though, having avoided collisions-by-daydream with the thousands of things they put along roadsides to collide with, the first thing I see is my little airplane, waiting for me. And I can’t believe it … That is an AIRPLANE, and it belongs to ME! Incredible. All those special-formed pieces and parts fitted so carefully together into such a beautiful clean sculpture, they can’t be mine! An airplane is a thing too beautiful to own, like the moon or the sun. There’s so much there! Look at the curve of that wing, the sweep of the fuselage into the vertical stabilizer, the sparkle of the glass and glint of the sun on metal and fabric … why, that belongs in the main gallery at the Museum of Modern Art!

So what, if I worked my heart out for the money to buy it, or if I rebuilt the whole thing up from sticks in my basement, or if I cared for it to the exclusion of every other element of a normal life. So what, if I spend nothing on liquor or cigarettes or movies or bowling or golf or boating or eating out or new cars or stocks or savings. So what, if I value this airplane when no one else in all the world has valued it, it still makes no difference, it’s still unbelievable that anything so beautiful could happen in the world to make an airplane mine.

I get to thinking about this, looking at the instruments and the radio, touching the control wheel, the fuel selector, the navigation-light switches, the upholstery of the seats, the little numbers on the airspeed indicator and the way the altimeter needle moves when I turn the adjusting knob, listen to the wind sliding ever so gently over the grass and around the curves of the airplane, and half an hour’s gone past, whap, like that. I sit there all alone in the airplane on the ground without moving much or saying a word, just looking at it and touching it and thinking about the thing and what it can do, that it can fly, and half an hour is half a second, it’s gone before one tick of the aircraft clock.

It can fly. Anywhere. And I know just what to do with my hands and feet on all the knobs and controls and pedals, in just which order, to make the airplane come alive and actually leave the earth and point anywhere on the globe, anywhere at all, and if I really want to get there, get there. Anywhere. From right where I’m sitting this moment. In this airplane. New York. Los Angeles. Canada. Brazil. France, if I want to install an auxiliary fuel tank, and then Italy and Greece and Bahrein and Calcutta and Australia and New Zealand. Anywhere. It is so very hard to believe that, and yet it is true without the shadow of question by anyone who flies airplanes. Anybody else can take it as fact proved a thousand thousand times over; I sit there in the cockpit and another half hour goes tick on the clock and it is impossible to believe. I understand it, all right, but I cannot honestly say that I can grasp it, that I can believe it, all at once, that an airplane can fly.

That’s just a start, that’s not even getting off the ground. That one word “airplane” means so much! How can anyone not like an airplane, or fear it, or find it less than beautiful to behold? I’m unable to accept that there can be a person alive, any human being anywhere, who can look upon this creature of curves and wings and walk away untouched.

The time comes, eventually, when I can force myself to get the engine going, the propeller turning, but I tell you it takes superhuman concentration to do it. Because I reach down to that handle and it says on it STARTER. Starter. That which starts, that which begins the whole journey up into the sky, across any horizon in the world. Starter. Touch that and my whole life changes again, events are set in motion that otherwise would never happen. Sounds will sound on the planet when otherwise there would have been silence; winds will twist and blast when otherwise there would have been calms; motions and blurs when otherwise there would have been still sharpness. Starter. It is so momentous that I sit there, hand suspended in mid-reach toward it and I have to swallow and tremble and ask whether I am man enough, whether I have the divine Permission of God to set all these galaxy-changing events in motion. The handle waits there, and the word on it is STARTER, all right, black letters on ivory plastic, letters faded from being touched so often over the years.





Touch that handle and a whole separate cosm lives: the engine. ENGINE. Dead cold steel for now, but a moment from now, if I will it, warm life and oiled bearings turning round and sparks flickering in darkness and pulses through eel-black wires and gages lifting awake and smokes and thunders and purrs and the standing whirlpool of sparkle and wind that is the propeller. PROPELLER. It propels. Forward. Into what? Into spaces that have never felt the touch of man, into events that test us all, against which we can measure our worth as human beings at work on destiny …

You can see the kind of trap I’m caught in. I can’t do the simplest work at the airport (oh, port of the air, haven of the little arks that sail the skies), I can’t just step into the airplane (wonder-filled machine built of magic prin …) and start (to set in mo …) the darn eng … (cosm …) without all the world roaring out in great golden glory-streaks and trumpets sounding in the heavens and angels flapping around the clouds and singing Alleluia in chorus twenty thousand strong, man-angels with low voices and woman-angels with high voices and all so grand and magnificent that there are tears in my eyes and I’m all melted in joy and praise and gratitude to the Mind of the Universe and I haven’t even touched the starter yet!

It’s that way with everything aeronautical, nothing’s immune, nothing that has anything to do with flying. If I stop the slightest instant over takeoff, for instance, I’m lost again. TAKEOFF. The taking off of those shackles and chains that have bound our fathers’ fathers’ fathers to the ground for centuries compounded, that held the woolly mammoth on the ground before them and the stegosaurs before them and the trees and rocks before them. It is our power, right now, to strike those shackles, to line up there on the end of a runway and press that throttle forward and move slow first, and faster and faster and lift the nose and clankrattleclinksnap the chains are gone. We can do this. We can take off. Any time we want, we can fly.

Or airspeed. A simple basic thought like AIRSPEED and I’m out there in the wind and my arms are wings and I can feel that air, that speed, that airspeed lifting me up, way up over the clouds away from everything false and into everything true, the clean pure straight honest sky. And there’s those trumpets again, and those blasted angels, singing about airspeed. A hundred miles per hour on the dial, why can’t it be a simple fact, and let it go at that? But no, never, not a chance. Got to be the glory.

You see how it is, then. Hangar. Fuel. Oil Pressure. Runway. Wing. Lift. Climb. Altitude. Wind. Sky. Clouds. Airway. Turn. Stall. Glide. Even Airline, and Flight Service, on and on and on. You see how it’s got me like a rat in a trap.

It would be all right, and I’ve been quiet about this for a long time, because if my role is to be a martyr, I’ll accept it humbly and upon my back bear the burden of this rare malady for the sake of all of those who fly.

But I speak out now because I’ve seen other pilots land, once in a while, and stop their engines and then stay in their airplanes longer than is necessary to fill out their logbooks, almost as if they were aware of glories. And yesterday I met a man who confessed aloud that he goes to the airport a half hour early, sometimes, and he gets into his Cherokee 180 and he just sits there in the cockpit for the fun of it for a while before he even starts the engine and taxies out to fly.



I was delighted to meet the fellow. Because I’m going to let him be the martyr now, and not me. I won’t have to bear that terrible burden anymore, or listen to those angels.

I’ll just go out to my airplane and I’ll climb into the thing and I’ll reach out for that starter and I’ll just reach right … out … for that … starter … Hm. The starter is really a beautiful creation, when you take a minute to think about it. What is it really starting, you know? It kind of makes you wonder …