# Letter from a God-fearing man

Richard Bach

I can keep quiet no longer. Somebody has to tell you people who fly airplanes how tired the rest of us get of your constant talk about flying, about how wonderful it is to fly, and won’t we come out on Sunday afternoon and take a little flight with you just to see what it is like.

Somebody has to tell you that the answer is no, we won’t come out on the Sabbath, or any other day, to go up in one of your dangerous little crates. The answer is no, we do not think that it is all so wonderful to fly. The answer, as far as we’re concerned, is that the world would be a far better place if the Wright brothers had junked their crazy gliders and never gone to Kitty Hawk.

A little bit we can take—we’ll forgive anybody for being carried away, when he is just beginning something that he thinks is fun. But this constant day-after-day missionary zeal that you have is just carrying it too far. And that’s the word: missionary. You seem to think that there is something holy about knocking around through the air, but none of you knows how childish it all looks to the rest of us, who have some sense of responsibility left for our families and for our fellow man.

I wouldn’t be writing this if the situation was getting better. But it is getting worse and worse. I work in a soap factory, which is a fine secure job, with a good union and retirement benefits. The men I work with used to be good responsible men, but now, out of six of us on the Number Three Vat day crew, five have been taken up with this flying madness. I’m the only normal person left. Paul Weaver and Jerry Marcus both quit work a week ago, they quit together, to go into some kind of business where they think they will tow advertising signs with airplanes.

I pleaded with them, I argued with them, I showed them the financial facts of life … paycheck, seniority, union, retirement … but it was like I was talking to walls. They knew that they’d lose money (“… at first,” they said. “Till you go broke,” I told them). But they just liked the idea of flying so much that it was worth it to them to turn around and walk right out of the soap factory … and they’ve been here fifteen years!

All I could get out of them in explanation was that they wanted to fly, and a sort of strange look that said I wouldn’t understand why.

And I do not understand. We had everything in common, we were the best of friends, until this flying business came along—a “flying club” or something like that swept like the plague through the people at the factory. Paul and Jerry dropped out of the bowling league the same day they joined the “flying club.” They haven’t been back, and now I don’t expect they ever will be.

I took the time yesterday, in the rain, to go out to the miserable little strip of grass they call an airport, and talk to the fellow who runs the “flying club.” I wanted him to know that he is breaking up homes and business all over town and that if he has any sense of responsibility he will take a hint and move along. That’s where I got the word “missionary,” and I don’t mean that in any nice way, either. Missionary of the devil, I say, for what he’s done.

He was inside a big shed, working on one of the airplanes.

“Maybe you don’t know what you’re doing,” I said, “but since you came to town and started your ‘flying club,’ you’ve completely changed the lives of more people than I care to name.”

For a minute I guess he didn’t see how angry I was, because he said, “I just brought the idea. They saw for themselves what flying is like,” almost as if it was a credit that so many lives had been wrecked.

He looked to be about forty, but I’ll bet he’s older, and he didn’t stop his work to talk to me. The plane he was working on was made out of cloth, plain old thin cloth, with paint over it to make it look like metal.

“Mister, are you running a business,” I said cuttingly, “or are you running some kind of a church here? You’ve got people running around looking forward to Sunday at this place like they have never looked forward to Sunday at church. You’ve got people talking out loud about ‘being close to God’ that have never said the word ‘God’ as long as I’ve known them and that’s all their lives, most of ’em.”

At last he seemed to be getting the idea that I wasn’t real happy with him, that I thought he’d better be moving on.

“I’ll apologize for them, if you’d like,” he said. I could hardly hear him. He twisted himself up under the dashboard of that little airplane, and started taking out one of the dials. “Some of the new students get kind of carried away. Takes them a while to learn not to say what they think out loud, sometimes. But they’re right, of course. And you are, too. It is a lot like a religion, flying.” He untwisted for a minute and ruffled in his toolbox for another screwdriver, with a smaller handle, and he smiled at me, an infuriating confident smile that said plainly that he wasn’t going to be moving on just because responsible people ask him to. “I guess that makes me a missionary.”

“Now, that’s enough,” I said. “I’ve heard just one time too many this flying-brings-me-near-to-God business. Have you ever seen God on his throne, mister? You ever seen angels flying around your tinker-toy airplane?” I put him a question like that to shake him up, to knock the cockiness out of him.

“Nope,” he said. “Never seen God-on-a-throne or angels-with-white-wings. Never talked to any pilots who have, either.” He was back under the dashboard again. “Someday when you’ve got the time, my friend, I could tell you why people talk about God when they get to flying airplanes.”

He fell into my trap without so much as a by-your-leave. I’d give him enough rope now, just hear him out, and he would hang himself on a limb of “… well … er’s” and vague mumblings that would prove he came no closer to being a preacher of the gospel than he came to working a vat at the soap factory.

“You go right on ahead, Mister Fly-boy,” I said. “Right now. I am all ears.” I didn’t bother to tell him that I had been to every town revival meeting for the last thirty years, or that I knew more about God and the Bible than he would ever learn in a thousand years, with his tinhorn airplanes. I actually felt a little sorry for him, not knowing who he was talking to. But he had brought it on himself with his ridiculous “flying club” business.

“All right,” he said, “let’s take a minute and define what we’re talking about. Instead of saying ‘God,’ for instance, let’s say ‘sky.’ Now the sky isn’t God, but for the people who love to fly the sky can be a symbol for God, and it’s not a bad symbol at all, when you think about it.

“When you’re an airplane pilot, you’re very conscious of the sky. The sky is always up there … it can’t be buried, moved away, chained down, blown up. The sky just is, whether we admit it or not, whether we look at it or not, whether we love it or whether we hate it. It is; quiet and big and there. If you don’t understand it, the sky is a very mysterious thing, isn’t it? It’s always moving, but it’s never gone. It takes no notice of anything unlike itself.” He slipped the dial out of its place, but he kept talking, in no real hurry.

“The sky always has been, it always will be. The sky doesn’t misunderstand, it doesn’t have hurt feelings, it doesn’t demand that we do anything in any particular way, at any particular time. So that’s not a very bad symbol for God, is it?”

It is like he was talking to himself, disconnecting lines, easing out the dial, all very slowly and carefully.

“That’s a pretty poor symbol,” I said, “because God demands …”

“Now wait,” he said, and I thought he was almost laughing at me. “God demands nothing as long as we ask nothing. But as soon as we want to learn about him, then we run into demands, right? Same way with the sky. The sky demands nothing of us until we want to learn about it, until we want to fly. And then there are all kinds of demands on us, and laws that we have to obey.

“Somebody said once that religion is a way of finding what is true, and that’s not a bad definition. The pilot’s religion is flight … flight is his way of finding out about the sky. And he has to obey those laws. I don’t know what you call the laws of your religion, but the laws of ours are called ‘aerodynamics.’ Follow them, work with them, and you fly. If you don’t follow them, no amount of words or high-sounding phrases means a thing … you’ll never get off the ground.”

There I had him. “What about faith, Mister Fly-boy? A man has to have faith …”

“Forget it. The only thing that matters is following the laws. Oh, you have to have faith enough to give it a try, I guess, but ‘faith’ isn’t the right word. ‘Desire’ is a better word. You have to want to know the sky enough to try the laws of aerodynamics, to see if they work. But it’s following those laws that matters, not whether you believe in them or not.

“There’s a law of the sky, for instance, that says if you taxi this airplane through the wind at forty-five miles an hour, with the tail down, at the proper weight, it is going to fly. It is going to lift right up off the ground and start moving up into the sky. There are lots of other laws that go on from there, but that one is a pretty basic law. You don’t have to believe in it. You just have to try taking the plane to forty-five miles per hour and then you can see for yourself. You try it enough times, and you can see that it works every time. The laws don’t care whether you happen to believe them or not. They just work, every time.

“You get nowhere on faith, but you get everywhere on knowing, on understanding. If you don’t understand the law, then sooner or later you’re going to break it, and when you break the laws of aerodynamics you leave the sky mighty fast, I tell you.”

He came out from under the dashboard and he was smiling, as though he had a particular example in mind. But he didn’t tell me what it was.

“Now, breaking the law, to a pilot, would be the same thing that you might call ‘sin.’ You might even word your definition of sin as ‘breaking the Law of God’ or something like that. But the best I can understand about your kind of sin is that it is something vaguely nasty that you’re not supposed to do for reasons that you don’t very well understand. Well, in flying, there’s no question about sin. It isn’t hazy in any pilot’s mind.

“If you break the laws of aerodynamics, if you try to hold a seventeen-degree angle of attack on a wing that stalls at fifteen degrees, you fall away from God at a pretty good clip. If you don’t repent, and get in harmony with aerodynamics before long, you’ll have some penalties to pay—like a huge bill for airplane repairs—before you’ll ever get back in the sky again. In flying, you get your freedom only when you obey the laws of the sky. If you don’t feel like obeying them, you are chained to the ground for the rest of your life. And that, for airplane pilots, is what we call ‘hell’.”

The holes in this man’s so-called religion were big enough to drive trucks through. “All you’ve done,” I said, “is take the words from church and replaced them with your words of flying! All you’ve done …”

“Exactly. The symbol of the sky isn’t quite perfect, but it is an awful lot easier to understand than most people’s interpretation of the Bible. When some pilot spins out of the top of a loop, nobody says it was the will of the sky that it happened. It is nothing mysterious. The guy broke the rules of smooth flight, trying too high an angle of attack for the weight he had on the wings, and down he went. He sinned, you might say, but we don’t consider that a nasty thing, we don’t stone him for it. It was just kind of a dumb thing that shows he still has something more to learn about the sky.

“When that pilot comes down, he doesn’t shake his fist at the sky … he’s mad at himself, for not following the rules. He doesn’t ask favors of the sky, or burn incense to it, he goes back up there and corrects his mistake; he does it right. A little higher airspeed, maybe, starting his loops. His forgiveness, then, comes only after he corrects his mistake. His forgiveness is that he is now in harmony with the sky and his loops are successful and beautiful. And that, to a pilot, is ‘heaven’ … to be in harmony with the sky, to know the laws and obey them.”

He picked a new dial from the bench and crawled back into his airplane.

“You can carry it on as far as you want,” he said. “Somebody who doesn’t know the laws of the sky would say it’s a miracle that a big heavy airplane magically rises off the ground, with no ropes or wires lifting it up. But that’s a miracle only because they don’t know about the sky. The pilot doesn’t think it’s a miracle.

“And the power pilot, when he sees a sailplane gain altitude without having any engine at all, doesn’t say, ‘There’s a miracle there.’ He knows that the sailplane pilot had studied the sky very carefully indeed, and is putting his study into practice.

“You probably wouldn’t agree, but we don’t worship the sky as if it were something supernatural. We don’t think we have to build idols and offer living sacrifices to it. The only thing we think is necessary is that we understand the sky, that we know what the laws are and how they apply to us and how we can better be in harmony with them and so find our freedom. That’s where that joy comes in, that makes the new pilots come down and talk about being close to God.” He tightened the lines to the new dial, inspecting them closely.

“When a student pilot starts to understand the laws, and sees them work for him just like they do for all the other pilots, then it’s all fun to him, and he looks forward to coming to the airport in the same way that maybe preachers wished their congregations looked forward to coming to church … to learn something new, and something that brings joy and freedom and release from the chains of the earth. In short, the pilot, studying the sky, is learning and he’s happy and every day is his Sunday. Isn’t that how any church-goer should feel?”

At last I had him. “Then your ‘religion’ says that your pilots are not miserable sinners, soon to suffer hell and damnation, fire and brimstone?”

He smiled again, that same infuriating smile that didn’t even give me the comfort of thinking he hated me.

“Well, not unless they spin out of a loop …”

He was finished with the airplane, and pushed it out from the shed into the sunlight. The clouds were breaking apart.

“I think you’re a heathen, do you know that?” I said, with all the venom I could, and I hoped a lightning bolt would strike him dead, and prove just how heathen he was.

“Tell you what,” he said. “I have to check the turn needle in this airplane. Why don’t you just come along and we’ll take one little flight around the field and you can make up your mind whether we’re heathens or the sons of God.”

I saw his plot at once … to push me out when we were up, or else hit an air pocket and kill us both in his hatred for me. “Oh, no you don’t. No getting me up in that coffin! I’m on to you, you know. You’re a heathen and you’ll roast in the fires of hell!”

His answer sounded as if it was to himself, more than it was to me … so soft I could barely hear him.

“Not as long as I obey the laws,” he said.

He climbed into that little cloth airplane and started the motor. “You’re sure you don’t want to go up?” he called out.

I didn’t dignify him with an answer, and he went flying all by himself.

So listen to me, you flying people, who talk about your “knowing the sky” and your “laws of aerodynamics.” If the sky is God, it is mystery and it is wrath and it will strike you down with lightning and affliction and make you suffer for your blasphemy. Come down out of the sky, come back to your senses, and ask us no more to join you on your Sunday afternoons.

Sunday is a time for worship, and don’t you forget it.

