# Loops, voices, and the fear of death

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It was supposed to have been a simple inside loop, out off the airways, way up high, just for fun. With the wind shredding itself in a great thundering hundred-mile cry through the flying wires, I lifted the biplane’s nose through a steep climb, through straight up, through an inverted climb … then stalled there, hanging from the seat belt upside down over thirty-two hundred feet of clear and empty air. The control stick went dead in my glove, the airplane wallowed lazily this way and that, and fell flat, like a giant slow-motion pancake, out of the sky. Dust and hay from the cockpit floor poured up past my goggles and the wind changed from clean thunder to a strange loud buffeting hum, a thirty-foot bumblebee in agony.

The nose made no particular effort to point down, the engine stopped in zero G, and for the first time in my life I was pilot of an airplane that was falling … just as if it had been derricked off the ground and cut loose.

I was annoyed at first, then apprehensive at the way the controls didn’t respond, then I was quite suddenly afraid. Thoughts flicked through me like tracers: this thing is out of control there’s altitude to bail out but my airplane will be killed this is the lousiest loop I am the worst pilot what’s this falling, airplanes don’t fall like this c’mon get that nose down …

Through it all, the observer behind my eyes watched with interest, not caring whether I lived or died. Another part of me was scared to panic, and cried this is not fun I don’t like this at all WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

What Am I Doing Here? The question has fired itself, I’ll bet, at every pilot who ever lived. When John Montgomery set himself to cut his glider loose from the balloon that carried it aloft, he must have thought, What am I doing here? When Wilbur Wright knew that he couldn’t get the wings level before the Flyer hit the ground; when the test pilots discovered that the Eaglerock Bullet or the Salmson Sky-Car, after fifteen turns of a spin, would not recover; when the mail pilots, lost above a sea of fog, heard the engine die on the last of its fuel—they all heard that question from the terrified voice within them, though they may not have taken time to answer.

“Any pilot who says he’s never been scared,” goes the saying, “is either stupid or a liar.” There are exceptions, perhaps, but not many.

For me it was spins, as I learned to fly. Bob Keech would sit calmly over there in the right seat of the Luscombe and say, “Give me a three-turn spin to the right.” I’d hate him for it and go tense as steel and dread the moments ahead and bring the stick full back and force right rudder, my face dead as old soap. I’d hang on, eyes squinted to count the turns, recover at last. I’d think in pain as I leveled, I know what he’s going to say. He’s going to say, Now give me three turns left. And Keech would sit over there, arms folded, and say, “Now give me three turns left.”

Yet that hour would fly past and we’d come skimming into the pattern and land and I’d barely set foot on the ground when my fear was forgotten and I was desperate to fly again.

What Am I Doing Here? The student on cross-country hears the question while he searches the checkpoint thirty seconds overdue. Many other pilots hear it when the weather around them turns from good to not-so-good, or when the engine misses a beat or the oil temperature turns a shade too high and the oil pressure a shade too low.

It is one thing to lean back in flight-office chairs and talk about how great it is to fly, it is another thing entirely when you are up in the air and the engine blows up and the windshield goes liquid gold in oil and the only place to land is that little tiny oat field down there, along the crest of the hill, with the fence at the end.

When it happened to me, there was a continuous dialogue all the way down to the ground, or, more precisely, there were two monologues. One part of me is intent on turning to final approach, holding airspeed just so, shutting off magnetos and fuel, judging the glide, steepening the bank because we are too high … The other part is gabbling in fright. “See? You’re scared, aren’t you? Big deal, you’ve flown all these airplanes and you think you like to fly but now you’re afraid! First you were scared the engine was on fire, now you’re scared you’ll miss the field, aren’t you? YOU’RE A COWARD, YOU’RE ALL BLUFF AND TALK AND YOU’RE NOT HAPPY NOW AND YOU WISH YOU WERE ON THE GROUND AND YOU ARE AFRAID!”

That day we made the landing in fairly fine style, propeller stopped, oil streaking the airplane in the strange beauty of liquids blown by the wind, and I was a proud peacock to set it down without a scratch. But even as I congratulated myself on the landing, I remembered that accusing voice telling me how scared I had been, and was distressed to admit that it had been right. Afraid or not, though, here was the machine safely landed in the oat field.

What Am I Doing Here is not supposed to have an answer. The voice that asks is hoping we’ll reply without thinking, “I shouldn’t be here at all. It is a mistake for man to fly and if I get out of this alive I will never be so foolish as to fly again.” The voice is content only when we do nothing at all, when we are completely idle. It is the voice of paradox, of self-preservation carried to the point of death.

The way to make time pass slowly is to stay absolutely bored. Bored, minutes are months, days take years to pass. The way for us to live the longest possible life is to sit ourselves in a blank gray room, waiting for nothing, through the years. Yet there’s the ideal that the voice asks us to choose—to stay in this body, this room, for as long as we can.

What Am I Doing Here has another answer, however, one we aren’t supposed to find … I Am Living.

Remember, as a child, the challenge of the high board at the swimming pool? There came the time, after days of looking up at that board, when you finally climbed the cold wet steps to the high platform. From there it looked higher than ever, the water looked a thousand feet down. Perhaps you heard it then, What am I doing here? Why did I ever climb to this place? I want to go back where it’s safe. But there were only two ways down: the steps to defeat or a dive to victory. No other choice. Stay on the board as long as you wish, but soon or late you must choose.

You stood on the edge, shivering in the hot sun, deathly afraid. At last you leaned too far forward, it was too late to retreat, and you dived off the edge. Remember that? Remember the joy that fired you back to surface so that you broke clear like a porpoise, streaming water, shouting YEEHOO! The high board was conquered in that instant, and you spent the rest of the day climbing steps and diving down, for fun.

Climbing a thousand high boards, we live. In a thousand dives, demolishing fear, we turn into human beings.

That’s the charm, that’s the siren song of flight: flight is your chance, pilot, to destroy fears on a grand scale, in a high and beautiful country. The answer to every fear, be it of high board or of three-turn spin, is knowing. I know how to hold my body as I leave the board, so the water will not hurt me. I know how the wing stalls and the rudder forces it to spin. I know that the world is going to blur like a runaway green propeller and the controls will fight against my hand. I know the opposite rudder pedal will be hard to push for the recovery, but I know I can push it, and the spin will stop at once. Before too long, knowing, I climb high and do spins for fun.

It is only the unknown that is fearful. As clouds lower about us, for instance, we are unafraid if there’s a runway in sight to land upon. We fear low ceilings only when the unknown lies below … fields or hills or treetops to come down in, when we have never once landed on field or hill or tree. But if we have landed in fields for years, if we know what to look for and how to control our airplane throughout, then landing in grass is no more frightening than landing on a mile of concrete.

All of life, some say, is a chance to conquer fear, and every fear is part of the fear of death. The student who grips the controls in apprehension is apprehensive of dying. His instructor alongside, saying, “Don’t worry. Relax. See? You can take your hands off the wheel and the airplane flies smooth as a feather …” is proving that there is no death nearby.

Every pilot first conquered the fears of a narrow envelope of flight. We first knew our airplane and ourselves well enough only to fly around the pattern on sunny days. Then we knew more and flew into the practice area; then out into the world, then into cloud and rain, over seas and deserts—all without fear, all because we know and control the airplane and ourselves. We grew toward becoming human, and we fear only when we lose control.

We learned to avoid when we could not control, which is to say that we began to overcome stupidity. Don’t Fly Through Thunderstorms is an axiom most pilots accept without testing. Never Trust Your Life To An Engine is a less heeded one, most often ignored by those who have never heard an engine stop in flight. Those pilots who fly without parachutes on black-night cross-countries and over seas of fog have no idea of where they might land if the engine quits, and without knowing haven’t a prayer of controlling the crash.

It is a terrible empty feeling to have a guaranteed certified approved modern engine snap its crankshaft or swallow a valve or run out of gas when the tank reads FULL. The feeling is all the worse when one can’t see to land, worse yet when one can’t bail out, and reaches ultimate despair when one finds he is a trapped and helpless passenger in his own airplane.

Certainly there are hundreds of pilots who fly without fear through black nights and over miles of fog, but their peace comes not from knowing and control, it comes from blind faith in the crate of metal parts that is an engine. Their fear is not overcome, it has simply been masked by the sound of that power plant. When that sound fails in flight, I give you fear, stronger than ever. It is not legality or guarantee that determines our safety, but how well we can fly.

I’ve been called Daredevil for flying passengers from wide clear hayfields, Chicken for refusing to fly them from a narrow runway facing hills and trees. Wild Crazy Irresponsible for picking up handkerchiefs with a wingtip, Overcautious for deciding not to fly at night without a parachute. But still I think that fear is something to be conquered in a fair fight, not ignored or swept under a rug of illusions that engines never fail. Fear, fear—you are a demanding enemy.

The biplane fell down from the sky, wallowing, buffeting. What am I doing here, the voice screamed. It took a second to answer. I’m living. And I bail out if we’re not flying by the time we reach two thousand feet. At two thousand feet I’ll pull the seat belt release and fall free, clear the airplane, and pull the ripcord. A shame to lose it because I can’t fly a simple loop. I’ll never live it down.

Slowly, like a big floating safe, the nose of the biplane eased downward. The terrible throbbing buffet began barely to fade, and the airstream to smooth. Maybe …

We roared through two thousand feet pointing straight down, under control again, and the engine blazed once, coughed, and burst back into action. Oh boy, the voice said. You nearly had it that time and you were scared as a rat. Scared to death. This flying business is not for you, is it?

We climbed back to three thousand feet, put the nose down till the wind shredded itself in a great thundering hundred-mile cry through the flying wires, and this time with a good positive pullup we flew a fine loop, the biplane and I. Then another, and another.

What we are doing here? Overcoming the fear of death, of course. Why are we in the air? We’re practicing, you might say, what it is to be alive.