# Prayers

Richard Bach

“You’d better be careful what you pray for,” somebody once said, “because you’re going to get it.”

I thought of that, twisting a Fokker D-7 hard through my little part of the Great Mass Dogfight scene in Von Richthofen and Brown. The scene had looked neat and safe when we chalked it out on the briefing-room blackboard, but now, in the air, it was scary—fourteen replica fighters crushed into one small cube of sky, each one chasing the other, a few losing position and diving blindly through the rest, rainbow paints flashing colored sunlight, the loud quick blast of a Pfalz engine as the plane flashed beneath without seeing, smoke trails and the thick smell of fireworks in the wind.

Everyone survived that morning, but I was still shaking a bit when I thought about being careful what we pray for. Because the very first magazine article I wrote, twelve years ago, was one in which I prayed that those of us who learned to fly in closed-cockpit airplanes might have a place to rent an open-cockpit one, for the fun of it, “… and fly a Fokker D-7 airframe with one hundred fifty modern horses in the nose,” I had written. And here I was this moment in helmet and goggles and scarf, pilot of a yellow-blue-white-green airplane, Fok. DVII lettered authentically on the fuselage. I came home from the film with forty hours in Fokkers and Pfalzes and SE-5s, my prayers answered so completely that I had all that kind of flying I cared to do for quite some time.

A few years after I had prayed for the Fokker, I had gone for a ride in Chris Cagle’s J-3 Cub, at the Merced Fly-in. Cagle had a thousand hours in that Cub alone, I guess, and as we flew across the afternoon he showed me how to fly at zero miles per hour and how to loop and roll the thing. I remember looking out the open door at the puffed yeast-doughnut tire, and past it to the ground way down below, thinking what a great little airplane, and some day, by God, I’ll own me a Cub! Today I own it, and it has big puffy yeast-doughnut tires and the doors open in flight and I look down and remember, Sure enough, it happened again: I got what I prayed for.

Time after time I’ve watched it happen, in my life and the lives of people I know. I’ve tried to find somebody who didn’t get what he prayed for, but to date I haven’t found him. I believe it: whatever we wrap away in thought is opened for us, one day, in experience.

There was a girl I met in New York, who lived in a tight-packed Brooklyn tenement, acred about by old concrete and cracking brick, by frustration and fear and quick wild violence in the street. I wondered aloud why she didn’t get out, move to Ohio or Wyoming country, where she could breathe free and touch the grass once in her life.

“I couldn’t do that,” she said, “I don’t know what it’s like out there.” And then she said a very honest and knowing thing. “I guess I’m more afraid of what I don’t know than I hate what I have right now …”

Better to have riots in the streets, better squalor and subways and sardine crowds, she prayed, than the unknown. As she prayed, she received; she meets nothing now that she hasn’t met before.

All at once I saw the obvious. The world is as it is because that is the way we wish it to be. Only as our wish changes does the world change. Whatever we pray for, we get.

Look about, sure enough. Every day the footsteps of answered prayer are ours to walk, we have only to lean forward and walk them, one by one. The steps to my Fokker were many. I helped a man with his magazine, years ago, and so came to know him. His prayers were in old airplanes and business deals and motion pictures, and he took his chance to buy, in a business deal with a film studio, the fleet of World War I fighters. When he mentioned this, I said I’d be ready if he ever needed a pilot to fly one; that is. I took one step that offered itself to be taken. A year later he needed two American pilots to join the group, in Ireland, flying the Fokkers. When he called, I was ready to finish the path I had begun with the first article, that first prayer about the D-7.

From time to time, when I was barnstorming the Midwest a few summers ago, a passenger or two would say, “What a great life you have, free to go wherever you want, whenever … Sure wish I could do it.” Wistful, like that.

“Come along, then,” I’d say. “You can sell tickets, keep the crowds behind the wing, strap the passengers into the front seat. We might make enough money to live on, we might go broke, but you’re invited.” I could say this, first because I could always use a ticket seller, and second because I knew what the answer would be.

Silence first, then, “Thanks, but you see, I’ve got my job. If it wasn’t for my job, I’d go …” Which was only to say that each wistful one wasn’t wistful at all, each had prayed harder for his job than for the life of a barnstormer, as the New York girl had prayed more for her tenement than for the grass of Wyoming or for any other unknown.

I consider this from time to time, flying. We always get what we pray for, like it or not, no excuses accepted. Every day our prayers turn more into fact; whom we most want to be, we are. It all sounds like justice to me; I can’t say as I mind the way this world is built, at all.

