

Flight on a Dazzling Plane

My aged granny often told me to wish for understanding and love among all people if I ever got a big fat wish. I see her grinning even now, her arthritic hands resting on the table, her thumb tapping a rhythmic tattoo.

On that day I just pulled out of my memories, I was nine--I had a lifetime to await that one big wish, so I skipped off to play hopscotch in my new red Keds, cotton socks loosely encasing my toothpick legs.

That was a very long time ago; I am the granny now. And recently I was swept into a—what?—an occurrence, a happening, a whirlwind that enveloped me for a short time, leaving me with profound feelings that I would hope everybody could experience at least once.

Rushing to catch my flight from Anchorage to Portland, I scurried--all the while muttering about my profound stupidity.

I had arrived very early. Bag checked, security line complete, I grabbed a coffee and chose a seat in a quiet corner, immersing myself in my current book.

There came a moment when I became aware that silence that surrounded me. Where was the usual flight departure hubbub? I should be hearing my flight announced by now, and fellow travelers—a wayward toddler, or a long-haired a kid with a scruffy backpack, or a young man wearing dusty colored fatigues and combat boots. Oops! What have I done? Departure board assured me that my flight was departing imminently, but at a different gate. I scrambled, waved credentials at the startled attendant, and stepped onto the plane as the door closed behind me. Clutching my personal paraphernalia, I spotted my center seat, and spoke to the gentleman closest to me on the aisle.

“Would you be kind enough to hold on to these things? The attendant said I could use the restroom if I hurried—”

“Yes ma’am!” he said, and I rushed toward the rear of the plane.

On return, plopping into my seat, I took notice of this person to my right as he handed over my assorted junk. His skin was the color of a Snickers bar and he was strikingly handsome. He wore midnight blue slacks and the crease in his trousers could have cut a dragonfly wing. A subtle pattern of intertwined burgundy diamonds marched down his matching sweater and an open collar peeked over the “V” neckline. His hair was curly and white, clipped short.

I sorted through my things, extricating my book, Myths to Live By, by Joseph Campbell. I shoved it into the pocket in front of me and worried my leather bag under the seat with my foot. All set. Then I remembered my cell phone. I snagged the leather bag, pulled it out, turned off the phone, and shoved it back into its temporary home. Throughout these antics I sensed that my seatmate was bemused, but I looked straight ahead, determined to be asleep before the plane left the tarmac. I closed my eyes and felt the air flow nozzle blasting my personal ration of air onto my face. Nozzle adjusted, I settled in again. I noted that my companion reached up to adjust his air, and as he did I remarked,

“By the way, please don’t call me ‘ma’am.’”

He smiled and perhaps nodded off; I know I did.

When the attendant approached my companion requested a glass of plain water, no ice. I did the same. I read for a while, and replaced my book into the pocket.

“...So tell me,” inquired my companion, “about one of those myths that you live by.”

I looked over at him and for the first time really saw him. Creamy skin, perfect but for a scattering of freckles parading across his nose, upon which perched gold-rimmed spectacles. I will never forget his amber colored eyes looking intently at me, as if to say,

“Don’t you dare look away.”

His mouth--well, any sculptor would have paid money to model it. The fact is, he took my breath away. In academic gown he could have marched with any university faculty; carrying a briefcase he could have breezed through the doors of the United Nations Building.

“Well,” I began, “the author is trying to guide the reader toward a spiritual center in today’s crazy society. But enough of the heavy stuff--you want a story so I will tell you one.” I chose the story of the Maya hero twins, Xbalanque and Huhnapu.

“The Mayans revered creatures that could live in more than one plane,” I said, “snakes and frogs and the like could live below the ground and in water, and on earth. And the Mayans worshipped birds, since they could fly up, talk to the gods and return to chat with the common people.

“These Maya boys had freed themselves from the dismal underworld and now walked on the earth like you and me. They had super powers, these two, and they tried to behave, but they could be rascals. So, as the story goes, one day the twins were ambling in the forest and they came upon the beautiful Macaw God, fresh back from visiting the heavenly bosses above...”

My companion stared at his shoes, smiling.

“The beautiful macaw,” I continued, “sat in a majestic ceiba tree. That’s the Maya mystical tree of life. He looked down, spied the boys, and--oh my gosh--did he put on a show! His feathers shimmered and flashed ruby-red and deep green in the bright sunlight-- and his teeth, made of turquoise and silver, grabbed the sun’s rays and sent them careening throughout the forest.

“‘Look at me,’ he crooned, ‘aren’t I the most splendid bird you ever saw? My feathers and my teeth are celestial, and besides that, I can chat with the gods!’”

My companion chuckled at my efforts to imitate the bird. Macaws have terrible voices, just to be fair to me.

“That Macaw God picked up his feet and stomped, and he cavorted, and as he moved flecks of sunlight bobbed and danced about.

“So one twin whispered to the other, ‘What a stuck-up bird. How about if we fix him?’

And as he spoke he winked at his brother. So together they hatched a plan to teach that haughty bird some humility. They loaded up their slingshots with pebbles, let fly, and--blam!--they shot the teeth right out of that bird’s mouth. Right there! As he sat on the branch of the ceiba tree, where the monkeys and snakes and beetles could see him in his shame.

“Well, the hero twins laughed and yelled, ‘So did you learn your lesson?’ And the macaw hung his head in disgrace.”

My companion smiled and thanked me, and as we began to talk I came to know a bit more about him. He was a retired bookkeeper, a modest man with many interests. He was returning from an Alaska cruise—he had accompanied his son and daughter-in-law, who were seated farther back in the plane.

I was returning from a writers’ conference in Anchorage and I had just learned that my first novel was to be published. He shared my excitement and I remarked that I was amazed to be doing this at my age.

“I’m seventy years old, after all!”

“Well, you certainly don’t look it!” He responded, almost snapping at me. I suspect he surprised himself when he said that.

We discussed a lot of things—seafood, German Shepherds, New Orleans beignets. He told me that he enjoyed painting and some of his work was being shown in a gallery in his hometown in central California. I mentioned that I sketched and painted too and we agreed that we could spend hours, even days painting and not miss the real world for a moment. I confided that I liked folk music, and anything played on the guitar.

“I love Spanish classical guitar music.” I said, “I will turn up the volume and open the windows so I can share the music with the world even if it doesn’t want to hear it.”

He said he loved rhythm and blues guitar, but he would put on his earphones to analyze the riffs and chords. We both agreed that Muddy Waters and Chet Atkins contributed a great deal toward making the world a better place.

We spoke of our children and grandchildren. We skirted political issues, but eventually a discussion commenced, and a lively discussion it was. At one point, I raised my arm to make a point and he turned toward me, grabbing the side of my hand in mid-air as he spoke.

That was an electric moment. I stopped talking and looked toward my hand, not knowing what to do. If I pulled away, I feared the message would have been insulting. I understood, I thought, that his

gesture was one borne out of enthusiasm as he spoke. But what to do? I froze—and did nothing. I just left my hand out there. Fortunately, at the very same moment he realized what he had done and removed his hand while he continued talking to me. A millisecond moment, a potential barrier which evaporated-- and we were past it almost without breaking our rhythm.

“If only everyone could have houses...” he commented dreamily.

“It would be wonderful,” I responded, “but we humans are weak; if we expected a house for nothing, soon we would demand more, and we would forget the meaning of gratitude and self-respect...”

Conversation ceased for some moments and then resumed. We talked about faith.

“I think we are born pre-packaged,” I said, “kinda like a tool set at the hardware store. It bothers me a little when I hear people begging for strength or patience from God. Don’t they know they arrived with everything they need to survive and all they need to ask Him for is guidance to find what is already inside them?”

“Sounds good,” he said, “but how do you explain the deaths of all the children who have been used as target practice throughout the centuries? What sort of survival package did they have?”

Hmmm. I didn’t have an answer. This time we both retreated into silence for a while. I thought his opinions seemed ethereal, utopian. My responses seemed rough and unsatisfactory; the box I kept them in had rough sides and sharp corners.

As we sat silent, facing forward, I became aware of the very-existent tension between us and I was quite sure his thoughts mirrored mine. I thought about how easy it would be to push up the armrest between us and retreat into that comfortable spot which would have materialized when he put his arm around me. But I didn’t, and he made no encouraging gesture.

At one point he turned away and said, almost absently, “I wonder why we are so much alike...”

I sensed that he was contemplating the barriers that existed between us, and I commenced to disengage. We both had lived the major portion of our lives, after all, and were irrevocably invested in the worlds we had created. We were both sensible people and it was time to revert to the responsible people we were.

So I withdrew, grasping at objective, philosophical, safe chatter.

“Well,” I took a deep breath, “We’re all alike aren’t we?”

I located some words from Campbell’s book and read, “All of us living beings belong together in as much as we are all in reality sides or aspects of one single being, which may perhaps in western terminology be called God...”

“Sort of like the sparkles and flashes created by the sun reflecting off the Macaw...”

“Exactly!” I said, and as the plane began its descent we returned to our private, sensible thoughts.

On terra firma, I gathered my belongings. My companion did the same. When he stood up, I noticed that his legs kept unfolding, seemingly forever; he was well over six feet tall.

“You weren’t that tall when you were sitting,” I remarked.

He grinned, “And you weren’t so short before...”

“That’s because you beat me into the ground,” I said, and we both laughed.

I stood in front of him as we joined the line of people waiting to deplane. I was very aware that he was standing behind me even though we didn’t speak. I suspect that eventually the man who sat near the window took his place between us. Funny, that man could have had two heads or green feet for all I remember; he is a cipher in my memory.

By the time I entered the airport proper my companion was not behind me; perhaps he waited to exit with his son and family. I decided to wait for a moment.

I hadn’t any idea what I would say. As he approached I offered my hand to shake his; and instead he gently took my hand into both of his.

“I wanted to tell you what a pleasure it has been to talk to you” I said, “and I wish the very best for you, always.” He still loosely held my hand, and there was a moment of silence between us. Then, in one smooth motion he put my hand on his heart and for just for a fraction of a moment, he embraced me loosely and kissed my forehead.

As we pulled away, I heard a masculine voice say, “What is this all about?”

My companion's eyes found his son's and he him as they walked toward their next departure gate. I admit I would have loved to know just what he said to his son.

My eyes sought the venue for my plane to Denver. As I walked I realized that I was still on a heady plane emotionally. The air seemed lighter, dreamier than what other people were breathing. Yes, there was a powerful physical attraction between us—but far, far more than that, we connected as two souls, two aspects of one being which we call God. We had been free to love and appreciate each other in a very lovely way.

I never knew his name, he didn't know mine, and it never mattered.

When I arrived home, I asked my husband, "Did you miss me?"

"Of course," he answered, "It was so quiet and predictable around here!"

I smiled; how could I explain to him that while flying from Anchorage to Portland I had unpredictably been transported to another dimension entirely, in which two ordinary human beings shared some extraordinary moments which enriched both, and which I suspect neither of us will forget?

I had just experienced something very special, something I would wish that everybody could experience in their lifetimes. That's it--that is my lottery wish for mankind.

I can hear my aged granny's thumb tapping on the table and I see a huge grin on her sweet face; I think she is pleased.

