

The Kindness of Strangers

The story of Charles Strohmer's experience the morning of 9/11 and the days immediately following.

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Heaven on earth ? at an Air Force base

by Charles Strohmer

Three hours out of London and flying uneventfully through florescent blue sky six miles above the Atlantic, the passengers aboard Delta Flight 59 were digesting their lunches, quietly absorbed in laptops or reading novels. Others fell drowsily captive to that vespertine atmosphere created on planes when the movies are running. Other than departing Gatwick 30 minutes late, at Noon (7 a.m. EDT), so far the only bother could now be heard in hushed buzz of passengers asking why all the video screens had suddenly gone blank. "The movies should be back on in a few minutes," an air hostess said over the intercom. "A computer needs re-booting. It happens. We apologize for the inconvenience.?"

Yawn. Passengers stretched, ordered drinks, queued for toilets. Someone across the aisle from me lifted his porthole shade and broke the spell of counterfeit evening. I was overwhelmed. The bright blue evanescence, which I once heard a pilot call ?severe clear,? stretched out into forever. It hurt your eyes to gaze at the boundless brightness. I turned away. Twenty more minutes passed. Still no movies. People fidgeted. The Boeing 777 droned on. Five hours to go before touchdown in Atlanta.

Suddenly everyone's attention locked on to the Texas drawl coming from the intercom. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. May I have your attention. Your serious attention." The dreaded words. Worst nightmares sprung from the fuselage, the overhead compartment, the unconscious ? wherever you had stowed them before boarding. A kind of holy moment spread through cabin. No one spoke. No one dared. We're going down.

It seemed much longer than the millisecond it took before Captain William's steady but troubled Texas drawl continued: "There's been a major incident in the United States and all air space throughout the nation has been closed. All planes in the air in the United States are being directed to land at the nearest airports, and all international flights into the U.S. are being diverted. We are okay. I repeat. We are okay. But we cannot land in the U.S. We will be landing in Halifax, Nova Scotia in about two hours. We can't give you any more information at this time. Please be patient and bear with us. We will have more details for you when we get on the ground in Halifax. Thank you for your cooperation."

Like synchronized swimmers on cue, passengers turned to face their seat-neighbors. Whispers arose. What do you think it is? Who knows? Maybe that announcement was just a ploy and we're really going down? Must have been a huge earthquake? What would they close all the airports for that? A nuclear bomb, then? Maybe the air traffic control system has failed? Does the captain even know what's going on?

Nothing made any sense to me. Why had the FAA closed all the airports? I had to know. Knowing would help me beat back worst-case-scenario self-talk. I quickly calculated to Eastern Time and realized that my wife would be in class with her first-graders. But how could I even be sure of that? Was she safe? What had happened? And where? Who had been effected? Was I even going to get home?

Someone must know. Ahh. Coming down the aisle toward me was a hostess whom I had spoken with earlier and had made a connection. I was traveling alone and there were no passengers near me. I decided to take advantage of that privacy. Our eyes met but I deliberately remained seated, hoping she would stop when I sought inconspicuously to flag her down. She stopped and crouched to listen. ?I know you can't tell me what happened, even if you know,? I whispered, ?and I'm not asking you to. But can you at least tell me, does the crew know what's happened?? She nodded discreetly, stood, and then continued on her errand. Well, it was something. A kindness. The first of many to come during the next four days.

Delta Flight 59 became the penultimate of 42 planeloads of international air travelers permitted safe harbor at Halifax International before the tarmac ran out of wing space. As we circled before landing, I was surprised to see the asphalt service road filled with

on-lookers in cars, vans, and pickups; like bystanders congregating to stare at a blazing house fire, they had queued to watch the emergency landings. Well, more than that. It wasn't just the striking sight of landing these huge commercial jets that had brought them out of their homes and businesses that sunny day. They knew what had happened. We still did not.

Taxiing to our place at the end of the long queue of planes, far from the terminal, we eased past the staring congregation of on-lookers until Captain Williams brought the 777 to a gentle halt. We heard the mic cue. Williams immediately thanked us for our patient cooperation and then provided what details he had of the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. "Hopefully," he concluded, "they'll re-open U.S. airspace to get these international flights to their destinations. So maybe we'll get out of here in a few hours."

We now asked a thousand questions of the crew, but they only knew Captain Williams knew. Cell phone service had been turned off as we flew to Halifax, and there were no televisions. The details available to us upon landing were still very sketchy and rumors still ran wild in the media about "more possible attacks." There was a rumor about "a plane crashing in Pennsylvania."

It would be nearly 24 hours after the attack before our imaginations would be seared by television images of flying machines, twisted I-beams, and charred bodies crashing, falling, and billowing in the explosive chemistry of terror, dust, and loss.

Two long, perfectly executed lines of 747s, 767s, 777s, Air Buses, and L1011s were now parked side-by-side on the tarmac. None would be flying anything for the foreseeable future except their carriers' logos on their tails. Ten thousand stranded passengers "a small town, and all the problems that come with it. The scene had been repeated across Canada, from Newfoundland to Vancouver. Many trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific flights had been ordered back to their departure cities. Across America, that the extreme sudden workout demanded of thousands of air traffic controllers went without incident is astonishing. The FAA had ordered some 5,000 civilian planes to be landed immediately so that the military could isolate any rogue planes still in the air. Within four minutes, 700 planes had been landed. Nearly 3,000 within the next hour. All 5,000 had been safely guided to the ground in under two hours. An impressive impromptu performance, never once rehearsed in aviation history. The FAA had safely landed 5,000 civilian planes across the US in two hours, a truly impressive impromptu performance, never once rehearsed in aviation history.

Now free to mill about the entire plane "a gracious gesture itself" I found a spot to stand unobtrusively near the open cockpit door to listen to the scratchy, AM radio signal coming out of Halifax, a source of constant news about the attacks, ninety percent of it still rumor. But there were stories in this cockpit, and I decided to chat up the pilots when they were free. "Why did you make the kind of announcement over the Atlantic?" I asked Captain Williams. "Why not just tell us what had happened?" He didn't hedge. While the videos were off (there had been no computer hiccup), he and his co-pilot had discussed what language to use. "We've got almost sixty years' experience between us," he told me. "Personally, we've never been in this kind of a situation, but colleagues who have been have told us that, in the air, some passengers may panic when they hear the words 'terrorist attack' or 'hijacking', so we talked for a long time about the right words to describe the urgency but not panic anyone."

We had now been on the ground a couple hours and flight attendants had been arriving at the cockpit with reports from the cabin. Snacks and water were running low, it was getting stuffy, a couple infants needed baby formula, some passengers wanted a smoke, others needed fresh air. Still squeezed into my spot near the cockpit, I listened to nearly sixty years of experience quickly process each problem as it arose come to wise decisions. The Halifax ground crew was notified about snacks, bottled water, and infant formula. The rear starboard door would be opened for smokers. "But for those of you who need to smoke," Captain Williams announced, "please take turns and don't crowd the area. And try to keep the smoke from filtering into the cabin." The want of fresh air was solved when the front starboard door was opened to admit supplies. "Let's leave that door open for a while after the ground crew leaves," Williams told a hostess. Such gestures, especially access to the pilots, made a world of difference in our social microcosm. They defused building tensions and made the confines bearable. I later learned that crews on some of the other carriers had not been as wise.

There was still the matter of reaching my wife. I gave up my post near the cockpit and looked for someone who might lend me a phone. But it was still pointless. Those with phones were wearing down their fingerprints punching numbers robotically every few minutes gambling against a busy signal. Very few won, those hours. But there were countless other stories, and near my seat I began

talking with a friendly couple who, apparently, had no phone. They introduced themselves as Robert and Georgia Matthews, from Memphis. A Christian minister, he explained that he had been in London for the opening ceremonies of a colleague's church. As I began to explain that I'd been traveling in England on a speaking trip, we heard the mike suddenly cue ? everyone had become acute to that sound. Captain Williams announced that the FAA had decided not to reopen U.S. airspace today. "We might be here for another day," he said.

The Matthews and I were digesting this development when Robert's trouser pocket suddenly began beeping. His daughter in Memphis had been playing phone robotics herself and had finally beat the odds. Voilà! A connection. Passengers around us were astounded. After he finished talking to his daughter, she took my wife's number and promised to get hold of her with news that I was okay and where I was. An hour later she got through to us on the plane to say she had been able to reach my wife.

Blessedly, our flight was half full, which made the seventeen hours we spent on board more tolerable. Well past midnight I copped three empty seats side-by-side at the very rear and tried to sleep. Around 3am, we were quickly deplaned on to the runway, shuttled to the terminal, hustled through customs, and immediately driven ten miles in yellow school buses to Shearwater, a Canadian Air Force Base, where we would be "guests" of Canada. It was a word used by the animated politician who met the group I was with at the school bus outside the terminal. He didn't seem like he wished he were home in a warm bed. He gave a warm Canadian welcome to "our good neighbors from the south" and promised with many promises that we would be well-looked-after. We were. But questions about how long we'd be your guests were met with we're taking it a day at a time.

Legends in their own time, forty-two winged ghost towns now waited on the tarmac, the topic of talk radio, press coverage, and conversations in every Halifax-Dartmouth home. The Shearwater encampment numbered about 750 stranded passengers ? two Delta flights besides ours, two British Air, and one partying Air Tours group from Scotland filled with vacationers to Florida. The remaining ten thousand had been housed across the area in schools and homes and in what remained of hotel rooms not occupied by tourists. The families that had queued in their cars and vans along the access road were not there just to gawk. Our time as guests of Canada would become the subject of the PBS documentary "Stranded Yanks," which aired during the one-year anniversary of 9/11.

I awoke at 7am amidst dim lighting, unfamiliar surroundings, and much snoring. My back ached from the stiff cot even after only 3 hours of (broken) sleep. I slipped from under the blue blanket, sat on the edge of the cot, and bent over to touch my toes. When I stood to stretch I saw before me the serried ranks of two hundred others in the huge gymnasium, curled up on cots or mattresses in various stages of sleep. Military personnel and Canadian Red Cross workers walked the hallways, where a few of the stranded roamed carrying white bath towels, evidently to-and-from the showers. Where would I eat, how long would I be here? We had been allowed to bring only our carry-on bags to the Base and I was already regretting that my Norelco electric shaver was stashed there. Come to think of it, what would I do for clothes, a tooth brush, tooth paste, deodorant, a hair brush? I heard a television in the distance and remembered my wife cautioning me, when we were finally able to connect by phone, about the images I'd be seeing. Pretty unbelievable. But here we were. September 12, I realized, had dawned. What do strangers stuck in crisis do? They can make their situation worse, or they can try to make it better.

And so had something else. Although I've been a Christian for a long time, I've never been able to imagine heaven's life. Truth be told, I stopped trying to picture it because there's not much I've ever come across that has ever captured my imagination on the subject. Besides, earth life can be pretty cool itself. Sure, images of cloud-sitting harpists and streets of gold are cool, too, but I'm a failed musician and never had any gold. (Mind you, I have given some thought to the gold standard there: what we treat so dearly in this world is valued as paving material? What's that all about?) Neither have Christian eschatologies been very helpful. Some carry too much of an evolutionary feel and some remind me of "global evacuation" myths touted by UFO believers. And they all contradict each other on some basic points, so which one is right? I think you get my point.

Even in the Bible itself it's pretty confusing, like when the Book Revelation mentions the "leaves of trees being used to heal nations." Now that is very cool, indeed. But where are these trees and nations located? In heaven? If so, why have I never heard even one sermon preached about heaven's nations? But perhaps these trees and nations are on Earth. If so, why do they appear in what appears to be a description of heaven? It's Oh too much. So years ago, along with all sorts of other things about the faith, I shelved the idea of heaven. Earth life is mysterious and demanding enough. But then I lived in a crisis on an Air Force Base and had an

awakening.

What do strangers stuck in crisis do? They can make their situation worse, or they can try to make it better. Somehow we went for the latter. In Christian terms, we gave grace to one another. It began on the plane and kept spreading it spread exponentially at Shearwater. Military personnel provided beds, cots, mattresses, hot showers, even earplugs! We had free roam of the huge Base and use of its televisions, recreational facilities, and movie hall. They fed us three superb meals a day from a large buffet-style restaurant. On our second day there they opened the officers' mess to us, where chefs grilled steaks and barbecued chicken outside in a terraced courtyard.

The morning of September 12, parents, teachers, and schoolchildren from the Tallahassee Community School of Dartmouth began arriving very early at the Base with dozens of large cardboard boxes: toothpaste, toothbrushes, deodorant, shampoo, underwear, hair brushes, mousse, razors. You name it. "Take what you need. It's our gift to you." This neighborly grace got to me. I was going to write that life became more normal. But something was dawning on me. Life was becoming heavenly.

Navy personnel, brought in just to open up more of the Base and help run it during our stay, gave us lifts into town when they got off-duty. I only had my dress shoes, and by Thursday my arches were aching so terribly from meandering the Base hours a day that I copped a ride to WalMart to purchase some tennis shoes. Others got lifts to Halifax to stroll the harbor or shop for gifts. Even the weather was a grace to us. With the exception of a couple hours one afternoon, blue skies and delightful temperature were the norm. I remember some of joking that "the service" was so good that, if we were now offered a hotel room, we'd decline and stay put. Here were no strangers, just good neighbors. Open lives, open resources, hospitality, freely given. Jesus' Good Samaritan no longer seemed mere story.

Here were no strangers, just good neighbors. Open lives, open resources, hospitality, freely given. Jesus' Good Samaritan no longer seemed mere story. Kathy from Salt Lake City put it this way: "It reminds me of Jesus saying, 'I was a stranger and you took me in and fed me and clothed me.'" I thought about a time in the Book of Acts, chapter 4, where communal Christian living is described as being that of "great grace" because everything was shared and so no one lacked any needed thing.

On Thursday, I remembered that I had the phone number of a pastor in Halifax whom I had met a year earlier in Romania. I wondered if he was around. He was surprised when I called and immediately asked me if I needed anything. Are you kidding, I said, this place is like a four star hotel. On Friday, he showed up at the Base with his Norelco electric shaver. Bless you, brother. His gesture was indicative of the ethos of Halifax, Dartmouth, and Shearwater those days, a givingness that seemed so normal that it judged the way I did "normal" life back home. We were responding to something so durable in the image of God in us: the ability to respond with great grace even in the wake of great evil.

I also noticed that we strandeds seemed to have entered a curious new relationship to time. I'm tempted to say that it was as if time had stopped, but that's too cliched, besides being inaccurate. It was a subtle change. Time was going on, but somehow had altered. Yesterday, we were busy westerners. Today everyone had time. And for this we must thank the FAA, for at Shearwater, the days of the strandeds departure kept getting pushed into the future ? each day we were told that no one could say how long we'd be there. For us there was no future. Just today. And within that novel existential period it really was quite remarkable.

Here's a for-instance. When people's paths would cross, and repeatedly they did ? in or outside the gym, in the mess hall or the lounges, at the shower lockers, on the paths to and from the barracks ? we had time. Time to say "Oh, hi, again," and then pick up a previous conversation. After all, what else was there to do but to get to know each other?

Narrative abounded, and between the unlikeliest persons. A shy 19-year old student from Oxford kneels beside the cot of a lonely 40-year old Kenyan woman, befriending her. A 25-year-old designer from Germany gets into an animated discussion with a 60-year-old CEO from England in the lunch queue. A middle-aged man from the States strolls the grounds chatting up a twentysomething au pair from France. Reverend Matthews and his wife comfort young newlyweds from England; their honeymoon had been interrupted. A knot of strangers from different nations and races share their histories while seated on uncomfortable gray plastic chairs in the sun outside the gym. A lone soul emerges from the cafeteria line carrying a tray of food but can't spot an empty

table; two Canadian Navy Lieutenants notice and invite him to join them. Evidently, this new relationship to time was a necessary part of the glimpse I was getting at what heaven's life must be like.

There was no disconnect, either, at least not that I noticed. What I mean is, we arrived as who we were. That baggage couldn't be left on the plane. Here I can speak only for myself. I, the entire me, had arrived, and I found that I carried a mental habit that was hostile to the new time. I would be pleasantly lost in someone's narrative and suddenly think I've got to get going now. I've got to go. But then I'd realize I don't have anyplace to go, nothing to do, I don't have to do anything, I've got time. Here was time to get to know people. Where are you from? How are you getting on here? Need anything? No? Where were you headed before your got here? Heaven must be like this t the very least, I thought, as much time as you want to get to know all sorts of people. "Oh, there you are again. Remember when we were talking about...."

At Shearwater, selfish interest and alienation were transformed into opportunities for self-denial, cooperation among the different, unity in our diversity. A depth of compassion and caring had been awakened in us that I don't think we knew we carried within, amid our wood, hay, and stubble. Heaven broke in and walls broke down between races, professions, classes, nationalities. Human suffering tasted something sweet of the saving grace of God as strangers became neighbors.

In all those days, there was no more stunning symbol of the transformation than during our three-hour flight from Halifax to Atlanta on Saturday, September 15. The dark blue curtains that separate the economy/business/first class sections were never pulled. The no-longer-strandeds automatically returned to their previously assigned seats when they boarded, but they were free to meander the plane without hint of reproof regarding status or class, but relationships had been formed at Shearwater between people of all classes ? the neighborliness begun on the ground between the well-heeled, the pedestrian, and the flight crew quite naturally sustained itself in the air. I'm a frequent flyer and I've never seen the ritual "pulling of the veils" suspended before. I really believe that it just never occurred to anyone to revive the old barriers. We'd been changed by grace.

And so there I was peering out a porthole in first class after we were airborne. It was another gorgeous morning, bright and clear. Captain Williams took us down the Atlantic Coast. Time slowed to a a crawl as we passed over New York City and saw, even five days on, plumes of smoke spiraling to reach us from the huge gray crater; ground zero; nee: the World Trade Center. I snapped a photo and then I stared until I could no longer see the ascending trails of tears. So, it really had happened.

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