

Flight

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"A single lifetime, even though entirely devoted to the sky, would not be enough for the study of so vast a subject. A time will come when our descendants will be amazed that we did not know things that are so plain to them."ⁱ

If you do not recognize this quotation, you may be forgiven. Not only is it an English translation, but the author lived and died roughly 1700 years before the Montgolfier brothers took to the sky in their hot air balloon. We do indeed take for granted things that Seneca could not have imagined.

My daughter, age 17, is learning to fly. The picture accompanying this columnⁱⁱ is her favorite of those she took last summer (Fig. 1). No doubt many of you have similar pictures, wing-strut and all, from many places across this great globe. Most of mine have a reflection of a 35mm reflex camera in the window. Even now, I still see in them the beauty that I saw through the camera lens, the wonder of that new view of old Earth. Looking at them reminded me of that first experience of flight, why we do what we do, and how we express the lure of flight. I have collected a few quotations here, and challenge you to name the authors. I admit that it is an unfair challenge: most of them could have been said by anyone who has pulled back the yoke on a small plane and watched the world fall away in that moment when the perspective changes, from the earthbound to the vertical, and I expect you will hear your own voice in many of them.

"I was sold on flying as soon as I had a taste of it."ⁱⁱⁱ

"As soon as we left the ground I knew I myself had to fly!"^{iv}

"Dad, I left my heart up there."^v

"Even before [we] ... had reached 300 feet, I recognized that the sky would be my home. I tumbled out of the airplane with stars in my eyes."^{vi}

"After about 30 minutes I puked all over my airplane. I said to myself, 'Man, you made a big mistake.'"^{vii}



Fig. 1. View of Honshu, Japan. Photo by Rowan Goble, 2017.



"I ask people who don't fly, 'How can you not fly when you live in a time in history when you can fly?'"^{viii}

"More than anything else the sensation is one of perfect peace mingled with an excitement that strains every nerve to the utmost, if you can conceive of such a combination."^{ix}

"I fly because it releases my mind from the tyranny of petty things ..."^x

"Sometimes, flying feels too godlike to be attained by man. Sometimes, the world from above seems too beautiful, too wonderful, too distant for human eyes to see ..."^{xi}

If you would like to re-experience the wonder of first flight, my next challenge to you is to teach. There is no higher calling than teaching. You will realize how much you take for granted, how much we all take for granted, that is new to every generation. I spoke to a high school class last month, using a swivel chair as a makeshift Bárány chair, and leading the students through a simple demonstration of the blind spot on an index card. The little exclamations of discovery were so rewarding. Please, pass along your knowledge, because new knowledge is the foundation of wonder. And the lure of flight is felt even by those who have not yet experienced it. Indeed, humans have always sought the power of flight.

I will end this collection of quotations with a favorite of mine, that was not intended to describe flight, but surely does, and captures too the perspective of a spacefaring age, where, as Seneca foretold, we find things made plain to us that were not knowable before:

"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."^{xii}

ⁱ Seneca, Book 7, first century AD.

ⁱⁱ Rowan Goble, view of Honshu, Japan, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Glenn, *We Seven*, 1962, quoted in *Air & Space Smithsonian*, Dec. 2016.

^{iv} Amelia Earhart, after her first flight in an airplane, a 10-minute sight-seeing trip over Los Angeles, 1920.

^v Francis Gary Powers, CIA U-2 pilot shot down over the Soviet Union, describing his first flight at age 14.

^{vi} Geraldyn Cobb, barnstormer and one of the Mercury 13, describing her first flight, piloted by her father when she was 12 years old.

^{vii} Charles 'Chuck' Yeager describing his first flight to CNN in a 1997 interview. In 1947, then-Captain Yeager piloted the first supersonic flight, and General Yeager later summed up his 30-year Air Force career with the words, "I've had a ball!"

^{viii} William Langewische, author of *Stick and Rudder* (my father's highest recommended reading for a student seeking to understand flight), speaking in 2001.

^{ix} Wilbur Wright, 1905, as told by David McCullough, *The Wright Brothers*, 2015.

^x Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, attributed, but I have not found the source.

^{xi} Charles A. Lindbergh, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, 1953.

^{xii} T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*, 1942.

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