Winner of the 2009 Mactaggart Writing Award

We Have Begun Our Descent

By Russell Cobb

There was a moment when I should have been afraid to fly. Any sane person would have been afraid. But back then, in that strange interlude between college graduation and a mortgage, fear was a foreign language. Chris and I took a puddle jumper on the now-defunct Royal Cambodge Airlines from Phnom Penh to Siam Reap, a small town that serves as hub for exploring the ruins of the ancient city of Angkor Wat, buried in the jungles of Cambodia. During our approach to Siam Reap, we had our noses pressed up against the window of the Soviet-era plane, fixated on a country that had only recently been opened up to foreigners.

As we came in for the landing, though, the pilot suddenly pulled back on the throttle and we headed into low, dense gray clouds. We had been close enough to see the runway. I don’t recall if the descent was turbulent. Back then, bumps in the air were like bumps on a gravel road; I barely registered them. We circled the airport and descended again. In the meantime, the weather had worsened. Thunderheads popped up all around us. Once again, we saw the landing strip cut from the jungle. “Just get this thing on the ground,” Chris gritted between his teeth, his hands gripping the arm rests.

This time, the plane bobbed and weaved, like a boxer on the ropes, absorbing a barrage of punches to the head. The pilot pulled back and up we went, into storm clouds that tossed the little plane around. The flight should have lasted only thirty minutes, but we had been in the air for over an hour, dodging in and out of storms. “We’re going to run out of fuel,” Chris said to me, his usually sarcastic voice turning darkly serious. “We can’t stay up here forever.”
The pilot finally came on to explain the situation in Khmer, which none of the dozen or so tourists understood. That is, except for two words: Phnom Penh. The pilot had decided to turn around and head back to where we came from. On the way back, a French couple wept behind us. A Spanish tourist told me he would take the boat up the Tonle Sap lake to see Angkor. Everyone except me and Chris headed back into the city. We took the next flight to Siam Reap.

Some years later, I found myself on a subway under the World Trade Center reading a study guide for the GRE. It was 9:05 a.m. on the morning of September 11, 2001, and I was late for work. I know it was 9:05 because I always checked my watch in lower Manhattan. If it was past 8:45, I would be late for my job as an Assistant Editor at the *World Almanac and Book of Facts*. Normally, I used the half-hour commute on the A train from Brooklyn to drill myself on analogies and antonyms: Headlong is to forethought as bare-faced is to shame. The opposite of itinerant is motionless.

A crush of people moved into the train and I couldn’t keep my study guide open. I often attempt to reconstruct this train ride: did I overhear something about planes hitting buildings? As best as I can recall, I completed the entire commute, from Brooklyn to Penn Station, directly below the World Trade Center around the exact moment the second plane struck, without any awareness of what was happening around me.

When I arrived, all the *World Almanac* editors were gathered around a window on the 24th floor, gazing down 8th Avenue where, only three miles south, the Twin Towers were burning. It is all so close, yet so far, like we are watching some magic stunt, as when David Copperfield made the Statue of Liberty disappear. The towers fell in front of our very eyes, and yet we all turned to the television for confirmation of what we’d seen. The incredulous voices of seasoned reporters drove the reality of the event home. Dust, smoke, and people were pouring uptown. The people looked like little ants whose mound had been stomped on. Around 10:30, we evacuated the building and I walked home to
Brooklyn, wondering what I would do about my flight back to Oklahoma the next day.

When I heard that flights out of New York were canceled indefinitely, I made a spot decision to jump in my car and drive for three days. My grandmother was sick with brain cancer and I had already arranged to take a week off work. In Tulsa, I sold my car and bought a one-way ticket back to New York. On the plane, the flight attendants gave us a quick lesson in subduing knife-wielding terrorists. If someone threatened to take over the plane, we were to surround him, using pillows to break the knife blows. I remember thinking how stupid all this was, this paranoia about another attack just like the one we have just been through.

And so I continued to fly. A couple of months later, I flew to California for my best friend’s wedding. The morning after my return, on November 12, 2001, I awoke to news of another plane crash in New York, in a neighborhood in Queens. Ever since 9/11, I listened to the news before heading to work. The thought of sleep-walking through another terrorist attack had jolted me out of my routine. I wanted to be aware of what was happening around me. Living in New York at the time, I felt it was important to have contingency plans for the worst possible scenario. I didn’t want to be one of those ants, running uptown because I hadn’t planned out my escape.

No one knew why the American Airlines plane had crashed in Queens, whether it was terrorism, a bird strike, or just bad luck. I decided to be late for work on purpose this time. What if this was a multi-stage attack? What if the next target was the Empire State Building? (My office was right next to the Empire State Building). The lack of knowledge generated multiple frightening scenarios, and I felt paralyzed by fear. I sneaked up to the roof of my fourth-floor Brooklyn walk-up and looked east toward JFK airport. I could see smoke billowing up about ten miles away. The blood drained from my face. I had been there last night, flying in from San Diego. A chain of thoughts ran together: I had been under the World Trade Center when the second plane hit. I was supposed to fly the day after 9/11. Now a plane had crashed near the airport where I had
been only hours before. Planes were crashing all around me. It was like some cosmic force was telling me: you cannot hide from tragedy. I went back down to the apartment and called in sick to work. All day, I watched coverage of the disaster of American Airlines Flight 587.

Only once have I canceled a flight out of pure fear. I arrived at the airport in Austin, Texas, and sat in my car, overwhelmed by the sight of jets overhead. I watched them roll down the runway, terrified for the people on board. How would that massive object manage to get itself in the air and stay there? I could barely watch, so sure that one of them would struggle to stay airborne, and then tumble to the ground. Watching this scene from the parking lot, I realized that there was no way I could force myself into one of those planes. I turned around and drove home. When I called my mom to tell her I wouldn’t be joining her in Miami for Spring Break, her voice took on a disappointed tone I hadn’t heard since high school. “Just don’t think about it,” she said. “Get yourself a magazine and a drink and you’ll be fine.”

Here was the first strategy for battling my fear of flying: willful ignorance. There would be other strategies for coping with fear, but the first one seemed like the easiest one. Pretend you’re not there. Psychologists, I would learn later, have a term for this strategy: desensitization. I decided to give it my best shot, since never did I actually believe that flying was dangerous. Some dark corner of my soul feared it, feared it worse than death itself. But consciously, I knew the statistics about flying. I can recite them by memory: your chance of dying in a plane crash is one in seven million. Your chance of dying in a car crash is one in one hundred thousand. Your chance of falling through or out of a building: one in five hundred thousand. The most dangerous part of your trip is your drive to the airport.

A day after I canceled that flight to Miami, I found myself back at the airport in Austin. Again I felt paralyzed looking at the jets take off and land. The night before the flight, I had been consumed by anxiety, anticipating the claustrophobia and then the terror as my worst fears were realized. I decided to break down the trip in chunks. First, I would wake
up and have breakfast. Then, I would drive myself to the airport and park the car. Then, check in and get my boarding pass. I would only concentrate on achieving one thing at a time. I got the boarding pass. I made it past security. I bought a magazine. Now, I was waiting to board. The flight was delayed, and so I waited a long time.

To desensitize myself, I brought student papers to grade. I pulled out the stack of papers and read the first line of the first paper. By the time I had finished the sentence, my mind had wandered off to a dark place, a place usually only explored during nightmares. On the plane, I tried to stay focused on the papers, writing my comments in red ink in the margins, all while fending off an overwhelming anxiety. This strategy worked for a while, but then the plane hit some Gulf of Mexico turbulence, and I clenched the papers in my hands. Later, when I was passing them back to the students, I noticed they were crumpled at the edges.

For a while, the pattern that I had noticed after the American Airlines crash in Queens seemed to stay in place: I flew somewhere and a plane crashed. I flew the same day that the shoe bomber tried to detonate his bomb. The day I flew back from Miami, I read about a plane crash in rural Texas.

I tell Nathan, my therapist, about “the pattern.” Nathan listens to my story, a rambling version of it. There are detours for the death of my grandmother some three months after 9/11 and the break-up with my girlfriend in New York. Then there is the move to Austin for grad school — the ultimate escape plan. For over half an hour, Nathan does little more than jot down notes and nod his head. Then, he asks me about my family life. “Where is your father?” he asks.

My father, I tell him, died when I was five years old. He was thirty-two when he found out he had cardiomyopathy, a form of heart disease in which the heart muscle slowly deteriorates. I had barely known him, I tell Nathan. My father was in and out of various hospitals since my earliest memories. When I was three, in 1977, he made the local Tulsa news as one of the first people to undergo a successful heart transplant. He lived for three
years with his new heart. This got Nathan’s attention, and for the last ten minutes of our session, it was he who did the talking. It was clear to him that my fear of flying was some sort of displaced fear of dying, like my father, at a young age. He gave me homework for our next appointment: write a letter to my father.

Nathan read my letter to my father and decided that his death, not some delayed onset of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder brought about by 9/11, was the ultimate cause of my fear of flying. As I was about to leave our last session, he made a startling revelation: he, too, had lost his father when he was five years old. This revelation was supposed to help me, I guess, but it had a strange effect. Suddenly, I saw Nathan as the patient and myself as the therapist. He had taken my fear and projected his own anxieties onto it. I felt hopeless.

The ineffectual therapy left me scrambling to find something to shake my fear of flying before a flight to Paris. I would be there for a year, and there was no getting around the trip. The thought of being on a plane for nine hours was intolerable; I felt panic sweeping over me just thinking about those interminable hours, trapped there with all those strangers. My time with Nathan was done. The talking cure, in my view, had failed. I searched around for other therapies: Emotional Freedom Technique, hypnosis, yoga.

Then I got a call from my aunt Martha. We were never close, aunt Martha and I, although we could have been. She was married to my father’s identical twin brother, who I am named after. I rarely saw them; they forswore our stodgy Episcopalianism for tongue-talking, faith-healing Pentecostalism around the time my dad died. In fact, I felt like I barely knew my aunt.

But here she was at my door, with this Bible and these CDs that would explain how Jesus could help me conquer my fear. I realized then that despite being an agnostic with absolutely no interest in the paranormal, the astrological, or the fantastical, I was as guilty of magical thinking as she was. I believed — no, belief implies some conscious thought process — I knew that I was destined to die in a plash crash. It was written. Where was it written? I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to find out.
“This idea that there’s some pattern,” she told me, days before my flight to Paris, “is the Devil talking. Satan has got your ear. There’s only one way to get out of this problem and that’s to let Jesus fix it. If you’ll just let Him into your life, this will go away.”

In the days leading up to the flight to Paris, I participated in dizzying array of events and interventions, all in the hope that I could get rid of “the pattern.” I went to Martha’s church and let strangers pray on me. They held on to my shoulders and said very earnest things to Jesus about delivering me. This I witnessed with the detached mix of skepticism and amusement with which I approach most things in life I don’t understand. There was also the hypnotist, working out of a ranch-style house in the suburbs of Tulsa. I don’t remember much except the plush white velour couch and the mantra she gave me to repeat: “I am stronger than my fears.”

Finally, there was the promise of better living through chemistry. Perhaps I could find a pill to block whatever strange synaptic firings were sending my brain into a free-fall of anxiety. My best friend (who suffered from his own paralyzing death anxiety) sent me a collection of Valium, Xanax, and Ambien in the mail. “As soon as the fear hits, pop the xannies,” he told me.

The night before the flight, I drove to the airport, parking just outside the gates. Planes took off and landed the way cars pulled into and out of driveways. But the more I watched, the more I felt the blood draining out of my extremities. My head started to swim and my mouth felt dry. Every plane that took off was a potential tragedy.

The truth is, I don’t remember much from the flight to Paris. I took one of each pill that Jeff sent me, and I tried to focus on the movies. I didn’t talk to anyone or eat anything. Every hour that went by seemed miraculous: We were flying over the Atlantic Ocean! We were all alive!
A strange thing happens with my fear. It has a tendency to appear and disappear when I least expect it. I’ve talked to many people who are terrified of the descent, when the ride gets bumpy and any number of things can go wrong. For me, descent signals the end of my fear. In my magical thinking, the pilot is a god-like creature. His words at the beginning of a flight can turn a near panic attack into a manageable inconvenience. His words at the end of the flight signaling our descent lift the dark cloud of fear. The flight is suddenly transformed: the plane is no longer an inevitable death trap, but a roller coaster ride or a bungee jump; thrill trumps fear. I am giddy with life.

After I’d been in Paris a couple of weeks, I sent Nathan a postcard, letting him know I’d made it. I dropped the postcard in the mail and then regretted it. He’d think that it was his sustained effort to get me to deal with the death of my father at age five. It would confirm his diagnosis and his treatment, when, in reality, it had nothing to do with my father. At least, I’d like to believe that, but, in truth, I don’t know what the cause is. I like to think my magical thinking is some sort of illness that will simply vanish during the takeoff of the next flight. Perhaps, it never will vanish. It has been almost eight years since it first set in and I saw a glimpse of “the pattern” in some dark corner of my mind.

I am no longer the same person. I have a wife, a son, a real job, a mortgage. I am no longer in that state of suspended adolescence I was in when the fear took over. And yet, here it is, still accompanying me on short flights and long-haul trips, dogging my rational brain with scenarios and patterns. Here it is on a flight to New York, causing me to imagine my own funeral and my son growing up without a father.

I’ve learned that, like an abusive roommate who yells at you for half an hour over an unwashed dish in sink, the best thing to do is not fight back. I cannot combat the fear. I cannot talk it down off the ledge with rational arguments about statistical probabilities. The best I can do is breath deep, stare straight into the bulkhead, and wait for it to stop, wait for those magic words: “Ladies and gentlemen, we have begun our descent.”