

Upon the Wings of the Wind

The phone rang. I was at my desk. It was Annie, my old law partner: “Susan, it’s time for you to stop flying.” Annie is the most direct person I know, and it’s not at all unusual for her to issue a directive even before saying good morning. Annie worries about me flying. Until this morning, though, her concern has

been limited to her refusal to set foot in or near any of the three airplanes I’ve owned during the 20-plus years I’ve been flying. She pressed on: “Haven’t you seen the paper? Joe Remcho died in a helicopter crash over the weekend. And now it’s time for *you* to stop flying.” Annie and I had worked with Joe years before, and he had remained a friend in the community of Bay Area pilots. Before he died last January, Joe was one of the state’s most respected election-law attorneys and a powerful voice in Sacramento.

Oh God, I thought, not Joe—the world’s most conscientious and careful pilot, and the most wonderful of people. My first thought was, How could this have happened? And my second was, Maybe she’s right. I should quit now, quit while I’m ahead. I’ve had plenty of years flying all over the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Why push it? Why fly?

When a friend dies in an airplane crash, it’s inevitable that one asks this question. At Joe’s memorial service in Oakland on a rainy day a few days later, the question hung in the air for me like incense in a Buddhist temple.

Why fly small aircraft? Why did Joe fly? Why do any of us fly?

There are the obvious reasons: It’s great fun, it’s always challenging, it’s the

only way to explore out-of-the-way places without spending most of your vacation driving there and back. For my criminal defense practice my aircraft is invaluable. I make court appearances in just about every county in the state without worrying about long wearying drives, freeway gridlock, airport congestion, carry-on luggage restrictions, security searches, bomb threats, or airline schedules. I’ve never had to surrender my Swiss Army knife. The food is always good. All I have to do is keep my airplane well maintained and keep up my flight skills.

Certainly, it has drawbacks. Private aircraft are expensive to fly and maintain. There’s always some risk. A lot of time goes into planning, keeping current, and making the trip a success. And sometimes, as people always ask, it’s scary. As pilots we assess the risks, compare them to the advantages, and then decide whether to continue. But why fly in the first place?

Joe flew to Sacramento from Oakland often. At 6,500 feet the flight exhibits the emerald, velvet contours of the East Bay hills in winter against a brilliant blue sky, shows the sprawl of urban expansion feeding its way up the flanks of Mt. Diablo, and along the way

allows a bird’s-eye view of the mothball fleet floating like a ghostly flotilla in Suisun Bay.

I’ve flown back to Oakland just as Joe must have at least a thousand times. From the air, one doesn’t hear the roar of the traffic or feel the frustration of trying to get somewhere in it; Oakland and Berkeley are landmarks, not urban areas filled with people, noise, stores, voters, landlords, plaintiffs, defendants, gangs, poverty, or wealth. I imagine Joe leaving behind, just for an hour, the most pressing concerns of the Legislature, the Supreme Court, and the state’s citizens who were his charge.

In the air we are alone with our thoughts and our visions. We are our best selves. Completely enveloped in the clouds, wind, or turbulence, we are one with nature, and we see it clearly. From the cockpit of a small airplane our quotidian concerns become the background against which we face the realities of life on the planet we all inhabit together.

I have come to depend on my hours in the air for temporary relief from the press of decision making and problem solving that make up the life of every lawyer. Whatever my earth-bound concerns, they disappear with the turn of a key as the engine jumps to life and the propeller begins to spin. I relax into the thought that they won’t return until I drive out of the airport and the gate closes behind me.

That is why I fly. I suspect Joe flew for some of the same reasons. I’ll miss you, Joe; it was an honor to have shared the skies with you for whatever time was allotted us. **CL**



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