

P.S.

I DON'T LIKE turbulence when I'm flying, but then again, I've not met anyone who does! The very concept of hurtling along at 500 or so miles per hour and, in a split-second and through no action on anyone's part, suddenly plummeting downwards many metres, is not an encouraging one.

Of course it's worst when you've just been served a tray of dinner or a drink. In extreme cases stewardesses hurl themselves to the floor to get the coffee pots on the ground to minimise the risk of injury. I once had a whole glass of tomato juice thrown onto me by an unexpected air-pocket. And it's never encouraging when the flight attendants are instructed mid-serve to re-take their seats; it makes you wonder just how bad it's going to get.

Now anyone can read the scientific explanations of what causes turbulence, and the reassurances of airlines, airline professionals and websites that there really is very little danger. It stands to reason; if it were as dangerous as it can occasionally feel, then no-one would fly at all. But the logic of all this does not entirely rid the tension for most people. Bodies become tense, breathing becomes shallow, people clutch their seats and glance anxiously out of the window to see if anything abnormal is going on. It just doesn't feel good.

The problem with turbulence is essentially lack of control, and uncertainty about what is going to happen. You are suspended in mid-air. Nothing, apparently, is holding you up, and suddenly the device that suspends you starts to bump and fall. Those tons of metal with their powerful engines start to seem no more substantial than a paper aeroplane against the great forces of nature. There is absolutely nothing you can do. Nothing, even, that the pilot can do, other than try to find a different altitude where the turbulence may be less.

For me it is a powerful reminder of how fragile we are. It is *good* to be reminded that we are not in control; that there are forces over which we have no jurisdiction; that God can disturb our lives *in any aspect*—physical, environmental, psychological, mental—at any moment, and that there is absolutely nothing we can do other than pray to Him and have faith that He is in control

Grab your seat!

and will do the right thing in our lives, even though we have no idea what the 'right thing' may be. Being conscious of our frailty is a great starting-point for spiritual growth.

That moment of seat-grabbing is particularly poignant during a turbulent flight. Humans seek to be grounded; it's a natural response, a survival instinct. When things start to rock, sink, or move unexpectedly, we seek something to which we may cling, something that may anchor us. We can't help ourselves; it is instinctive. Absolutely pointless, of course (if the plane falls out of the sky, clutching at our seat will scarcely help us!), but an inevitable human response. We seek contact with the stable, the firm, the eternal.

Yet so many seek to live their lives without any grounding and with nothing to cling to. They assume 'everything will be OK', and when life becomes turbulent they clutch vainly at things that can offer no real security or assurance. It is life without an anchor. For much of the time it can seem just fine. But then trouble comes, and there is a frantic scramble for non-existent grounding.

That is their problem, of course, rather than ours. Our problem is more likely to be the devaluing of the anchor we have. For much of the time, life goes along just fine; we may appear to have no particular 'needs' that our daily routine and capacities are not equipped to meet. There is a real danger of forgetting God or taking Him for granted at such times. It is like a flight without clouds, air-pockets or inconvenience.

But the metaphor of the turbulent flight and the grabbing for the seat makes the importance of stability come rushing back. We live our lives under an illusion of control (control by us, that is), which is a deception. It is God Who is in control, and our need for the grounding and security that only He can provide is very great indeed. Life can be turbulent, and in those times faith in the goodness and righteousness of God can be the only true anchor of the soul.

We long for a day without clouds, of course, when the turbulence and destabilising forces of this life will be a thing of the past. But in the meantime it is good to be fully aware of our complete dependency upon Him.

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