

The Questionnaires

Although scheduled to depart that Sunday morning at 7:50, the passengers of Flight 1155 had not been permitted to board the aircraft until 10:25, and since all had complied with the new security protocols at considerable inconvenience, arriving at the airport at least one hour ahead of the flight's scheduled departure, the collective mood as they crowded the jetway could be described rather generously as irritable. Even without the repeated boarding delays many of them felt jangled. Repeated alternations of rush and arrest are intrinsically at odds, after all, with the very concept of an airport terminal, which is not a destination but a distribution mechanism designed to speed streams of people to idling planes and then hurl them into the sky. Among these travelers were many who could cite a recent past when they had moved through the world with ease and dispatch, who prided themselves on arriving at the airport not a scant moment before it was absolutely necessary. They could change planes with aplomb back then, save hours or circumvent delays with a few words of instruction whispered into their PDA's. But the high-ceilinged corridors and broad concourse-intersections originally designed to facilitate swift flows of humanity were now employed to corral those same humans into milling queues along worm-trails fashioned from stanchions and cables, and the dissonance provoked by this contradiction had a noticeable effect on even the most compliant of the passengers, inducing a perceptibly querulous sensitivity. Consequently at least a third of the flight's passengers entirely disregarded the request to emplane back to

front by section and instead rudely boarded at random, stowing their carry-ons wherever they found room, while the rest of the plane's manifest sweated out the boarding process crowded into the jet-way. Then, once seated, further delays occurred when the more spiteful among the passengers proved dilatory in turning off their infra-red devices, fastening their seat belts, stowing their tray-tables, and raising their seatbacks to an upright-and-locked position, with the result that it was well past 11 a.m. when Flight 1155 backed away from the gate.

Yet wheeling now to join the take-off queue, the craft seemed to hum with an almost palpable euphoria. Spirits were high suddenly, particularly among returning travelers who looked forward now to the homely satisfaction of reclaiming familiar territories, to visit their own bathrooms, to read a newspaper and enjoy a cup of coffee at their own kitchen tables, and then sleep once again in the welcoming embrace of mattresses that understood them. Naturally, here and there, a few passengers still felt a residue of resentment, but in their relief to be restored to the respectability of motion, even these seemed willing to let bygones be bygones if only they could be up and away.

As the flight attendants commenced their routine safety presentation, however, the airline's gate agent passed row by row through the aft and forward cabins to distribute printed questionnaires, and this, some of the passengers knew at once, was not routine at all, for none could recall an instance when questionnaires had been distributed at the beginning of a flight, and the questionnaires themselves were so amateurish in design and crude in appearance that a sinister sense of displacement seemed to emanate from them. In fact they were nothing more than 8-1/2 by 11 sheets of cheap drafting stock, like unbleached news-pulp, folded once in half, with questions on all four sides, and they weren't even printed in the conventional sense, they were mimeographed, literally

drummed off a roller. Many of the younger passengers had never seen materials like these— spotted and over-printed, a text so unevenly inked in purple that even within sentences the impressions varied from a ghostly mauve haze to a clotted illegibility. While as for the questions, who had ever encountered a survey so pointlessly impertinent?

Are memories real?

Have things in general gone too far?

Does God punish the wicked?

Can you recall past lives?

Is freedom of speech all right all the time?

When you hope for the best do you see anything?

Have you ever participated in group sex?

Should people be free to sell their organs?

Does someone you know deserve a good beating?

Are achievement tests biased in favor of white people?

Do you have personal experience of a terminated pregnancy?

Have you ever begged for your life?

Have you ever lied for money?

Does capital punishment make you feel safer?

Does suffering redeem us?

Should people be examined more frequently?

Do you enjoy games of chance?

Do unpleasant thoughts seem to stay with you?

Do you ever see yourself dead?

“Sa-a-aay,” said a starboard window just aft of the wing, while his seatmate pointed out that certain questions were repeated in ways that could not possibly be attributed to typographical error.

Is there anyone you trust?

Do we ever get over things?

When you're alone is anyone there?

Is there anyone you trust?

Perhaps most disturbing was that no two questionnaires asked the same questions, and the confusion this inspired was particularly intense in business-class, where several of the passengers appeared to know something about these matters.

“I don’t know if I ever heard of this technique,” said a marketing executive from Minneapolis to the systems analyst sitting next to her. “Pupil dilation, blink-rates, galvanic skin response— but this one, frankly I don’t know what to tell you.”

Besides, she asked, unless you repeated certain questions in a variety of ways, how would you know if the respondents were answering truthfully?

The systems guy shrugged and extracted a pencil from his pocket protector. Since all the questions were of the closed-ended, yes-or-no sort, he was finished in no-time, then he tucked the form into his seat-pocket and resumed working on the Mensa puzzles toward the back of his in-flight magazine.

Other passengers, however, proved unable to respond to the questionnaires so casually. The information being elicited was nobody’s business, one of these protested, and when the passenger adjacent to him pointed out that the questionnaires were anonymous, strangely, this seemed to agitate him even further. It was outrageous, he said, and apparently that was all the adjacent aisle-seat needed to hear, for now she, too, refused to cooperate with the process, so that before anyone knew how it happened between a quarter and a third of Flight 1155 were implacably opposed to answering the questions. Nor was there any discernible pattern to this resistance. Men and women, husbands and wives, young and old, all differed randomly on the question of the

questions, and no one was budging. If anything, the truculence of the resisters tended to decide the undecided, for now they, too, split along broken lines, and there matters stood, and so did the plane, which had come to a lurching and inexplicable halt.

“Uh, this is your captain?” It was the pilot, his name reduced by the public address system to a cluster of garbled fricatives, and it was at this point, most of the passengers agreed later on, that things passed from the merely unusual.

“Well, you’ve all got your questionnaires by now and just as soon’s as we’ve got ‘em filled out and collected we’ll be putting this puppy in the air. Just let our flight attendants know if you need a pencil, and let me take this opportunity to thank every one of you for your cooperation. It means a lot. We’ll be starting our approach just as soon’s we get clearance.”

An oddly strangled silence followed this announcement, comparable perhaps to a sudden drop in cabin pressure, not a termination of sound but of the capacity to hear it. A refusal to integrate? An arrest of function? In any case people couldn’t believe their ears. “What did he say? We’re not taking off?” Then somewhere aft a woman was heard to laugh out loud. “This is the end!” she hooted, “This is perfect!”

She was a middle seat, just forward of the aft restrooms. She glanced impatiently at her wristwatch then hunted furiously through her purse for a pen. “Now I know how it feels to be a hostage,” she muttered.

Her general attitude, however, was scrupulously sardonic, and several passengers in her vicinity, who had been adamantly opposed to the questionnaires until then, now found themselves inspired by her example, observing that by adopting an appropriately affronted tone it was possible to comply with the airline’s demands without any

appreciable loss of dignity, while elsewhere aboard Flight 1155 some former objectors felt swayed toward compliance by an enhanced appreciation of the situation's gravity.

Still, spontaneous conversions like these were rare, and there was little doubt both fore and aft that things were growing tense. Not that anyone wanted to argue — why buy trouble, reasonable people asked — but knowing they were divided, people would be caught glancing corner-eyed at one another, as if a time might come when these same likenesses might have to be reconstructed by police sketch-artists. They couldn't talk to each other about anything else of course since any attempt to change the subject would have seemed suspicious, but the talking only seemed to heighten their collective helplessness, and attempts at indifference lapsed inevitably to a damply enveloping sense of disruption, for without exception everyone felt a profound resentment that after hours of halting progress toward departure, after repeated delays and prolonged confinement with its sickening sense of arrested motion, that now on this final downslope to takeoff this anticlimactic and arbitrary lapse should occur when suddenly absolutely nothing happened.

“What are we doing here?” people asked. “What are we sitting here for?” For most of Flight 1155 these were the moment's questions. Soon, though, the situation would become more complicated, so it might be useful to pause here for a moment to describe how things stood as precisely as possible.

First, had the passengers been polled just then, it would have been found that no one explicitly favored the questionnaires on any grounds whatsoever. Rather they seemed of a piece with the absurdity of modern air travel in general, coming with the territory as it were, like a cost of entry, with the additional qualification in this particular instance that they appeared to be of no utility at all. Most of the passengers could only assume the

questionnaires had something to do with that tangled web of innovations referred to euphemistically as “the new realities of air travel,” and in business-class there was a fragile consensus that in the interests of security people nowadays had to expect this sort of thing since it seemed unlikely that an airline would take such outrageous liberties unless they were necessary. Yet even among sophisticated travelers like these no one could suggest how questions of such insolence could have anything to do with customer satisfaction, and upon examining the proposition more carefully, all agreed that none of it made any sense. Air travel was not what it used to be, that was clear enough, but after that it was obvious that no one really knew anything.

Overall, then, inured as they were to obstacles of all kinds, a slim majority of the passengers simply dismissed the questionnaires as relatively minor impositions. Surely this was not the worst that could happen on a plane, and the loopy vagueness of the questions tended to render the whole situation rather trivial.

Does spelling count?

Does neatness count?

Do good things come to those who wait?

Indeed, it may have been this very triviality that seemed to sap people of their indignation, and the longer the aircraft bumped along the taxi-way, the more vacant of significance the matter seemed to become. It was as if one might have preferred the gravity of a true disaster — a fuel leak, a crash at sea, a cockpit struggle, or perhaps one of those harrowing piracies you saw videotaped from time to time, granular, rain-spotted, the victim-aircraft isolated on the runway, silhouetted figures flitting at the portholes, occasionally an awful flare of light, more harrowing in its silence than the gunshot it represented, over everything the grim gibberish of the reporters— but like almost all of

life in general, little here of any real importance seemed to be at stake, and therefore most of the passengers were willing to comply with the situation simply for the sake of being done with it. As a practical matter you didn't endure duckbites like these because they made any sense, and you certainly didn't take exception to them personally or on grounds of principle, since there would have been no end to that. Real issues were matters of personal relevance, and since most people were doing moderately well, if only in a conditional and rather desperate way, the rational approach to absurdity was to dispense with it as expeditiously as possible. This was also considered the healthy thing, and generally it was agreed that health was the important thing. Sooner or later the aircraft would take off, or at worst it would simply return to the gate, and at that point the better informed of the passengers would take up the matter with their attorneys. Indeed, not a few of the passengers looked forward to the opportunity — federal policy was quite clear on the subject of tarmac delays — and in the meantime most were fairly certain that within a week this particular morning's vicissitudes would be overtaken by others like water closing over itself so that in time none of it would really matter.

But if that were the case, the objectors replied, then the situation didn't matter now either, did it, and clearly this wasn't the case since how could anyone say this didn't matter?

As one might have expected, most of these objections were sounded in coach, which seemed to represent most of democracy's deficiencies, but small pockets of resistance seemed to be forming among the twelve passengers in business-class as well, and there was little doubt both forward and aft that among the questionnaire-friendly majority there were several passengers who were growing frankly irritated by the endless dithering the questionnaires seemed to elicit from some people. Not that those objectors weren't

entitled to their point of view, their opponents conceded, but why should they be permitted to impose their foolishness on everyone else? For the imposed-upon this seemed only a further injustice. Besides, they said, the longer those troublemakers were indulged, the more likely they were to infect the others.

It was as if they knew who the holdouts were, and the immediate sense of polarization this precipitated put everyone on notice. Some of the passengers tried simply to sleep through the situation, hoping that in their absence as it were, the problem would resolve itself that much sooner, but the moment's suspension wouldn't permit them to relax. There was no rhythm to adopt, no comforting motion with which they might fall into phase. People would close their eyes and adjust their breathing, but surrendering to indifference felt suddenly perilous, producing a sensation like strange hands rooting in their pockets, and far from easing into sleep, they were only moved to grip their seat cushions more tightly with their buttocks. Even the flight's most experienced travelers, people who cultivated tolerance and resilience as professional necessities, had to wonder if some critical line had been crossed, and now wondered if it wasn't time to consider early retirement, or the feasibility of launching some home-based business that might be operated by computer.

Given everyone's appreciating anxiety it wasn't surprising that dense queues had formed by now in both cabins to use the restrooms, filling the aisles and looming over the passengers now trapped in their seats, with the result that everyone, both standing and seated, felt more vulnerably conspicuous. The crowded aisles also made it difficult for the port and starboard seats to communicate with each other, so it might have been one o'clock in the afternoon before everyone aboard had become aware that Flight 1155 was no longer part of the departure queue, which was now visible from the starboard ports as

a conga-line rolling steadily along the taxi-path and then wheeling diagonally plane by plane to take off along the main runway. Triangulating mentally, and referring to the airport map at the back of their in-flight magazines, the more cartographically proficient of the passengers inferred that Flight 1155 was now probably stalled somewhere between the Air National Guard base north of the control tower and the municipal acreage leased to the air-taxi service where most of the community's private aircraft were hangared.

Still, wherever they were, stalled was stalled, and if the passengers had been angry before, now even their boredom had a serrated edge to it. For many this state of having empty and rudderless time on their hands may have been the one thing they had always struggled to avoid. Life wasn't a noun for them, it was a verb, a vector, mobile and deliberate, yet any hope these Sunday travelers may have entertained until now about salvaging some portion of the weekend for themselves, or getting a jump on the work-week ahead, had evaporated with the failure of the flight to depart as scheduled.

"How can they do this to us," people demanded of each other, and since ventilating one's anger is always more satisfying than nursing a baffled impotence, for perhaps half an hour Flight 1155 experienced what seemed to be a second wind.

Convinced that meaningful relief could be expected from neither the airline nor one another, the passengers ferociously redoubled their solitary efforts to make their distress known to the outside world, a process some would compare later to charging headlong into a wall of aspic. Nevertheless, vast networks of colleagues, friends and family members who had been contacted hours earlier by phone were now blandished again by passengers demanding to know what was happening; only to discover that the situation was substantially unchanged, or perhaps a bit worse, since, owing to the current call-volume, estimated time to contact a service representative at the airport's administrative

offices was now pegged at forty minutes, while any mention of Flight 1155 triggered a synthesized robo-message reproduced here in its entirety as follows: “Flight... eleven... fifty... five... is... cleared for departure.”

It was all so bitterly disheartening for these otherwise capable men and women. None of them had actually done anything to warrant this abuse, yet each of them seemed determined to be accountable for the situation, perhaps in the way that nature abhors a vacuum, for everywhere one could hear pained expressions of regret, as if scheduling an earlier or perhaps a later flight might have spared them this experience. Since none of this remorse had any real basis, however, all it yielded was a humbling melancholy that forbid people from taking their distress too seriously. If anything they seemed beyond relief, as if they were prepared now to accept anything that might happen to them.

Outside it was apparent that a cloud cover had moved in from the way the low sky had become indistinguishable from the flat gray of the airfield, a prairie of cement that seemed endless through the Perspex, but inside, too, the ambiance was gray and watery, a winter light like melted snow that made the overheads seemed lower. Some of the passengers had their reading lamps on, but in the general murk these isolated and colorless holes of light seemed only to make the interior dullness all the grayer. Books and magazines, newspapers and various articles of clothing, all these seemed strewn anyhow, as if a general indifference had settled on the plane. People slouched carelessly in their seats or stood awkwardly in place, leaning across the adjacent seatbacks, or stretched backward to release the cramps in their legs, but the anticipation of flight that had animated them at boarding had declined during the past several hours to a listless vacancy of expression. People looked eroded, as if dragged through gravel. They glanced emptily at one another as if there were nothing more to be expected. The air itself seemed

measurably heavier, a damp weight that could be felt on one's skin, and along with its aromatic burdens of aviation fuel and stale peanuts the sodden air had taken on the feral notes of the pet-shop and nursing home, making everyone more vividly aware of the organisms sitting next to them. Beneath bright clothes one saw lungs softly bellowing, moist purplish valves popping open and closed. Swamp-like internal vistas appeared to the mind's appalled eye where soft squirty little glands secreted their contents along wet reticulations of meat-colored piping. Then all at once the restroom queue seemed to heave its full length in serial convulsion as its occupants struggled to reverse direction in response to the news that both aft restrooms had been taken out of service, owing probably to the inability of certain people to follow the disposal instructions.

A moment later, however, the captain had returned to the p-a system and was now assuring everyone there was no cause for alarm. It had come to his attention that the aircraft's restrooms needed to be serviced, and as a safety precaution the plane would be towed out of harm's way to a maintenance hangar on the other side of the field. "Why don't they take us back to the terminal," someone asked, but almost immediately a brief jarring shook the plane as a small utility tractor engaged the landing gear at the aircraft's nose and a moment later it was towing the plane briskly along the airport perimeter toward a cluster of vacant hangars on the opposite side of the field. There the tractor veered the plane's length perpendicular to the first of the hangars and then backed it slowly inside, a maneuver that caused a liquid shadow to advance back to front along the plane's interior as if a curtain were being drawn across its ports. Yet far from alarming Flight 1155, this advancing darkness seemed to calm and reassure its weary occupants, perhaps the way dimming houselights encourage theater audiences to settle into their seats, and though absorbed by their grief they seemed strangely content, as if frustration

had restored them to familiar territory, deepening their sadness but at the same time instilling a comforting lethargy, a release of tension like surrendering to sleep.

Yet here and there aboard Flight 1155 there were vivid exceptions to this apathy, such as the contained excitement of Mr. Nathan Hemmings, an I-T consultant from Edison, New Jersey, who continued to anticipate the ulterior meaning of the day's ordeal to reveal itself. Not that he had suffered more cruelly than anyone else, but like his fellow passengers Mr. Hemmings felt brutalized arbitrarily and therefore considered it only right that the experience yield some consoling benefit.

Mr. Hemmings had been prone since childhood to negotiate these metaphysical, essentially one-sided transactions for the fairness they seemed to compel from an unfair world, and in middle age he continued to believe whatever he imagined. Things were much simpler for Mr. Hemmings this way, and more than anything else it was simplicity that he believed in. It was the same reason he believed in the existence of some god or creator, since this was easier than imagining the universe had created itself. Let it be said, too, that Mr. Hemmings was also willing to believe that nature's presumed lawfulness might be merely an artifact of his own physical construction and that as a product of the universe he occupied, Mr. Hemmings had no choice but to see things the way he saw them; but experience had long ago convinced Mr. Hemmings that conjectures along those lines never yielded the simplicity he needed.

What had come of it all, Mr. Hemmings asked. What had been learned, or affirmed, or refuted? What had changed for any of these people? What did they know now that they hadn't known before?

He looked down then and saw his folded questionnaire tucked into the seat-pocket in front of him, noting with some embarrassment that in his prior eagerness to comply with

the captain's request he'd neglected to answer the questions on the back page. As if to compensate for this oversight, he now considered these unanswered questions with particular care.

Are you punctual?

Do you pray?

Would you like to have your say?

Do you owe someone an apology?

Do you have a favorite sin?