

In-flight disciplines

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue



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On a recent plane trip I read the in-flight magazine and found the letters column especially interesting. One reader wrote that he loved the airline, saying it “has all the qualities I look for in my future bride: always on time, greets me with a smile, welcomes me home and takes care of me during our time together. OK, so I’m a hopeless romantic who thinks I will meet my future wife on my next flight.” Others wrote that they found their flights “comforting” and “enjoyable.”

I shared the letters with a friend who was traveling with me, and we agreed that such enthusiasm wasn’t typical of our experience of air travel. Always on time? You must be kidding.

Flight attendants and pilots generally are courteous and friendly. But air travel is arduous. It begins in the ticketing line, with the hectoring computer that demands fees for checked-in baggage and wheedles for upgrades, extra leg-room and the purchase of additional mileage. The ordeal ramps up in the security line, which tends to be long and requires waiting. Once one winds through the maze and arrives at the front of the line, there is the virtual undressing—off come shoes, belt and jewelry. One does this while juggling a briefcase and perhaps a second bag onto the conveyor belt running through the X-ray machine.

The next move on the other side of the X-ray machine is to clumsily gather bags, belt and shoes and pad to a nearby bench, where you re-dress and regroup. Then, if it’s near mealtime, you partake of some expensive airport food and drink, since

there won't be any semblance of real food on the plane.

Heading on to the gate, it's time to sit and wait some more. Eventually you board the airplane, jostling with other travelers down the jetway. If you have an aisle seat, your shoulders, elbows and head are likely to be bumped by the baggage being dragged through the close space of the cabin. The seats themselves are of course tight and cramped. There's more waiting for the plane to take off.

The tightness of the seats makes any trip at least somewhat unpleasant. Other factors—crying children and odorous or garrulous seatmates—can make a flight positively grueling.

Once the plane lands, one waits again to deplane and then again to collect one's baggage. That's the last wait, unless you also have to wait—now hobbling along with rolling and hanging baggage in tow—for a taxi or shuttle bus or rental car.

I've described a representative trip and assumed no extraordinary inconveniences, such as lost luggage. I know we moderns should hardly complain, given how difficult and prolonged travel was prior to the jet age. If I take that point to heart, I'm still prone to some complaining (the seats are cramped!). But I realize that air travel—perhaps paradoxically—tutors us in patience, a practice in short supply in today's world.

E-mails and cell phone calls are instant. Our food is fast. Our cars are too. Patience remains a virtue and even a spiritual discipline. Pressing a cell phone button or clicking an e-mail message, I may instantly commune with a friend on the distant West Coast. But to be bodily present to that friend, I must "suffer" and endure several hours of travel. And suffering, said St. Paul, produces patience, which produces character, which in turn produces hope—hope which, sustained, will not disappoint (Rom. 5:3-5).

As he does so often, Paul puts things in perspective. He reminds us of a hope that we can only await—and we must await it with patience, as we hope for the salvation of the world and the mending of all creation. That cosmic hope reframes and redeems our petty patience. In fact, it makes our mundane patience on airplanes more than petty. It turns our otherwise petty patience into practice for the great patience of awaiting salvation. Standing in lines, delayed in a terminal or on a long plane ride those of us who otherwise are busy and hassled and have so little time are given time. That time can be filled only with patience—patience with those who

wait with us, patience to pray (inconspicuously but really) and to wait mindfully, living in the present even when it is inconvenient.

I'm not quite as perky or ebullient as letter writers to in-flight magazines, but by grace I am finding the wherewithal for a little more patience.

And the particular flight that prompted these thoughts? The pilot landed the plane with hardly a bounce. My traveling companion said she could only hope her future groom might be half as smooth.