

Thoughts of Miracles on the Plane

William B. Zieburtz, Jr.

I am right now flying through the air. It is just me, just regular old me, just my mother's son, and yet I am flying 37,000 feet above the ground. It seems miraculous, and miracles give rise to questions. The first being—what forces keep me up here?

Well, as I understand it, the air pressure under the wings of this plane is somehow greater than the weight of the plane. How could that be? Well, again according to my best understanding, the velocity of the plane and the design of the wings are such that enough air moves in the right way to ensure that we stay aloft. And how does this happen? Well, the engines on the plane burn fuel to propel us through the thin air at great speed, allowing the wings to do their job. And how does all this happen?

Or perhaps the more interesting question for the moment isn't so much how, but who? Who makes it possible for me, a man who probably couldn't pass a high-school physics test, to fly? Even in my relative ignorance, it is a long list. Engineers and other designers; metallurgists; fabricators; inspectors; skilled machinists and mechanics; technicians; specialists in hydraulics, electronics, weather, communications, dispatch, and avionics; computer programmers; air-traffic controllers; and a flight crew, just to name a few.

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The list is trivially short in comparison to the pages a complete list would fill, but it is amazing nonetheless, and it leads directly to the next question: why?

Why is it that all of these people have worked together to move me from Atlanta to Los Angeles? Why have they coordinated and cooperated on my behalf? Why, when none of them care about my meeting or the people I go to see, have they worked so hard to make my trip so easy and convenient? Why were components manufactured with great precision, and assembled with talent and care? Why was fuel purchased and why was a flight crew assembled? Why were flight schedules established, drinks and snacks loaded on board?

It is as if the world somehow has aligned itself for my benefit. For me, the son of my father and father of my son. A regular guy, with not a single person on this planet ready to bow or scrape at my arrival. I am moving faster and more comfortably right now than the richest and most powerful man in the world could have moved just a hundred years ago. For thousands of years it would have been impossible for a man to travel as I am doing right now. Yet it is within my power to fly to Miami for the winter, to Maine for the summer, and to spend New Year's in New York if I wish.

But it is just me, emperor of nowhere, crown prince of nothing. I have no claim on the lives of any of the individuals who have worked on my behalf—no ability to ask them

for favors, no chance of obtaining special treatment. Yet they help me, the father of my daughter, brother to my sister, do something even Caesar could not envision. Why?

The answer, being important, is both complex and simple. It is because they are each free to seek their best way in the world, and their best way is to be of use to me and legions like me. Being free, these men and women apply their talents in an unimaginable variety of ways, creating new technologies, finding new approaches, dreaming new dreams. I don't have to know who they are,

and they don't have to know each other, much less me. They merely know that the market rewards them for hard work and creativity, for diligence and dependability, for being useful to mankind.

Cooperating without a plan, coordinating without orders, thousands of individuals combining to create an industry ready to serve. This is the result of a free market. That man can fly across the country at 526 miles per hour and at 37,000 feet is amazing. But the market that lets that man be me—now that's a miracle. □

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