

Of Flight and LifeContemplations on the Life of Charles A. Lindbergh

Every time I go to Washington, D.C. I make a pilgrimage visit to the Smithsonian Institute. There are many remarkable things to see there, but always I take my view of one. It is a frail little airplane hanging by wires from the ceiling. It is a single-engine plane named The Spirit of St. Louis. It is the tiny aircraft in which a young pilot by the name of Charles A. Lindbergh made a sensational flight from New York to Paris 47 years ago. He made that flight alone in 33 hours and 29 minutes.

At least I think it was, and still is, sensational. Since Monday of this past week, August 26, when Charles Lindbergh died in Hawaii at the age of 72, I have thought much about the flight and life of this man. Indeed, in 1948 he wrote a book which he called Of Flight and Life. What this man did and thought, and what the events of history did to him, are worthy of our serious reflection. I invite you this morning to recall this life with me.

As can many other living Americans I can recall exactly where I was standing and what I was doing on May 21, 1927, when the word was flashed over the world that Charles Lindbergh had landed safely in Paris. I happened to be on Water Street, in front of the Millikin Bank Building, in my hometown of Decatur, Illinois, when the word was flashed in a newspaper heading special. As a boy I grew up with an intense fascination for this epochal event. I read Lindbergh's first book called We and then a series of boys' fiction, the adventures of Ted Scott, which were based on the Lindbergh legend. As an adult I read his book Of Flight and Life, and then eagerly devoured his book The Spirit of St. Louis, his autobiographical narrative setting forth his planning and execution "of the first nonstop airplane passage between the continents of America and Europe, concluding with an hour-by-hour account of that momentous, desperate, triumphant first flight over trackless waters." (dustjacket) If I were to go to Washington, D.C., I would once again ~~my~~ find my way to the Smith-

sonian Institute where I would ~~have~~ gaze up in awe and wonder at that frail little airship.

Because the life of Charles Lindbergh tells so much about what has happened in a stunningly short time in our world, and because his life tells us so much about ourselves, I would like this morning to draw from his saga several relevant observations.

-I-

The first is that Lindbergh in that lonely flight of 47 years ago exhibited a raw, indomitable ^{to} human courage that is very rare in the affairs of men, but which is awe-inspiring.

Lindbergh largely designed that little plane, The Spirit of St. Louis, by himself. He went to San Diego, Calif. to supervise its construction. There was a seat in it for only one person. He took no excess baggage, certainly no luggage. All space was sacrificed for the sake of ~~fine~~ fuel. He took no radio, no sextant. He navigated by the stars. He had a minimum of gear, only a few sandwiches and coffee. For 33 hours and 29 minutes he flew alone over a trackless ocean waste, fighting sleep and boredom, ice and fog.

This speaks of a kind of courage which I think we need in many other areas of contemporary life. I think of my own simple flight through this life and the courage that I often need to stand alone. I wonder if I make too many compromises, if I sacrifice principle more often than I should for the sake of comfort and place. I wonder if I really believe in the purposes I set for myself long ago, and if it will have strength to endure to the end.

In his detailed account of the flight Lindbergh records these thoughts:

If I fly through storm over the Atlantic, it may propitiate the gods; and by the law of averages alone there should be less chance of striking another over Europe. If I make the whole flight without meeting anything worse than those scattered squalls in Nova Scotia, I'll feel as though I'd been cheating, as though I hadn't earned success, as though the evil spirits of the sky had disdained to sail forth in battle. A victory given stands pale beside a victory won. A pilot has the right to choose his battlefield - that is the strategy of flight. But once that battlefield is attained, conflict should be welcomed, not avoided. If a pilot fears to test his skill with the elements, he has chosen the wrong profession. (p.302-303)

And then just a few pages later:

Subconsciously, without understand the full significance of my action, I adopt a basic rule for the flight. Somewhere, in an unknown recess of my mind, I've discovered that my ability rises and falls with the essential problems that confront me. What I can do depends largely on what I have to do to keep alive and stay on course. If there were no alternative, I could fly blind through fog during all the night and day. The love of life is sufficient guarantee for that. But there is an alternative, the alternative of climbing faster; and that I choose. My head is thrown back to look upward. My neck is stiff. But what of it? Hold on to these stars. Guide on them. Don't let them get away. (p.310)

I wonder if that doesn't say much about how one manages to live with courage.

-II-

Lindbergh paid dearly for his fame and his courage and faith were tested to the limit when his baby son, Charles, was kidnapped from his home in New Jersey on March 1, 1932 - just five years after his heroic flight. 72 days later in a patch of woods in the same neighborhood the baby was found brutally murdered. The Lindbergh Kidnapping Law was effected because of this tragedy.

This tragic event of history showed us something about the violence that tortures our society today. In Lindbergh's career we glimpse an intensely dramatic and real vision of the bestiality and brutality of man. This ought to tell us something, still, about our society, and ourselves. There is a raw streak of animal violence and anger in our blood. It happens every day, everywhere, but it gets dramatized when it occurs to the great and the near-great. It shows us what man does to man, and the pathetic need we have in our common human life for tenderness, compassion and mercy. Lindbergh's life and career encompass a nature that is "red in tooth and claw." How could we ~~ever~~ ever doubt our need for humanization, for compassion, for Christian love and brotherhood?

-III-

The third observation of Lindbergh's life, though unpleasant to me, is not really surprising. It is always disillusioning to find that your heroes have patches of clay. Lindbergh certainly did. For in one period of his life

Visiting the sunny Highfields, the home of the Lindberghs in a thick wooded area near Hopewell, N.J. where the baby was snatched from the nest

he exhibited a racism and a fascination with fascist ideology.

Those who know Lindbergh's story recall that in the ~~years~~ events that led up to World War II Lindbergh was, for a time, captured by Nazi propaganda and made blind to the signs of cyclonic evil that ^{were} ~~was~~ gathering in Nazi Germany. Lindbergh went to Germany and was given the highest decoration by Hermann Goring, pinning upon him the Service Cross of the Order of the German Eagle, with Star, and doing this in the name of the Fuhrer, Adolph Hitler. Many will recall this romance of Lindbergh with the Nazis and his participation with the America First organization which sought to keep America out of World War II.

Lindbergh apparently was impressed with the Nazi doctrine of white superiority. In addition, Lindbergh had a long and fateful relationship with a distinguished scientist, Alexis Carrel who happened, also, to be a champion of white supremacy and anti-semitism. During this phase of his career, Lindbergh made many statements that were blatantly racist and anti-semitic. When the Japanese struck at Pearl Harbor, of course, he offered his services to his nation - services that were somewhat reluctantly accepted.

I cite this as an example of the flawed character of human beings. All of us - perhaps even the most saintly - have areas of blindness and sin. All of us have to struggle with the temptation to indulge ourselves in racist notions of supremacy, to look down upon other human creatures, even to indulge in hatred and snobbery. It is a streak in the human person that must always face the grace and love of Christ.

-IV-

One other observation about Lindbergh: in his maturing years he did exhibit too a spiritual sensitivity, even a theological bent, that can only be thought of as elevated and noble.

In his hour-by-hour account of his flight in The Spirit of St. Louis, he records a most revealing and rewarding thought:

During the long ages between dawn and sunrise, I'm thankful we didn't make "The Spirit of St. Louis" a stable plane. They very instability which makes it difficult to fly

blind or hold an accurate course at night now guards me against excessive errors. It's again a case of the plane and me compensating for each other. . . . When I was fresh and it was overloaded, my quickness of reaction held its nose from veering off. Now that I'm dreaming and ridden by sleep, its veering prods my lagging senses. The slightest relaxation of pressure on either stick or rudder starts a climbing or a diving turn, hauling me back from the borderland of sleep. Then, I fix my eyes on the compass and determine again to hold it where it belongs. (p.362)

Is this not a good analogy for man understanding himself, and realizing his own nature make those spiritual compensations which help him to live abundantly, always keep one's eyes on both the stars and the compass?

In his little book Of Flight and Life ~~Lindbergh~~ - written ~~xxx~~ 21 years after his solo flight - Lindbergh speaks of his early fascination with science. He tended to make science a god that could do everything and answer all questions. But in a time of deeper maturity he wrote:

I now realize that while God cannot be seen as tangible as I had demanded as a child, His presence can be sensed in every sight and act and incident. I know that when man loses ~~his sense~~ this sense, he misses the true quality of life - the beauty of earth, its seasons and its skies; the brotherhood of men; the joy of wife and children. He loses the infinite strength without which no people can survive through time - the element which war cannot defeat or peace corrupt. I now understand that spiritual truth is more essential to a nation than the mortar in its' cities' walls. (p. 52)

I like to believe that this spiritual sense deepened Lindbergh's faith and broadened his sympathies with his fellow human beings. It is most significant that the last endeavor he was making was ~~in~~ the Philippines for the World Wildlife Fund, to encourage animal conservation. There he also became deeply interested in the Philippine tribes ~~men~~ people and efforts under way to "conserve" them. The plight of these tribespeople was similar to that of the American Indian in the 19th century. Apparently his last days were spent in showing compassion and concern for the very kind of "yellow" people whom earlier, in more racist moods, he had disparaged.

At the very simple memorial service held for him in Hawaii for only family and a few friends it was disclosed that in his last days, when he knew he was going quickly to die of cancer, he had selected the passages himself. One of

these was from that great passage from Isaih which was read to you earlier today:

~~xxxxxtheyshallwaitxxxx~~

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God

the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary,

his understanding is unsearchable.

He gives power to the faint,

and to him who has no might he increases strength.

Even the youths shall faint and be weary,

and the young men shall ~~wickerly~~ fall exhausted;

but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,

they shall mount up with wings as eagles,

they shall run and now be weary,

they shall walk and not faint.

(40:28:-31)

I suppose that ~~xxxxx~~ soon now we will be seeing on television, probably on the late show, a film produced about ten years ago, "The Spirit of St. Louis." It was an attempt to capture the essence of that historic flight in 1927. It is significant, I believe, that this film was considered a box-office failure. Who in the age of space probes, nuclear submarines, and trips to the moon, was interested in a young man flying a tiny little plane across the ocean? But I know I will want to see that film again, and the next time I am in Washington, D.C. I will go to the Smithsonian Institute once more and gaze up at that frail little craft. How terrible it is for us to lose our sense of awe and wonder! How sad it is for us to be ~~unmoved~~ by courage and strength! How serious it is for us to miss this contemplation of the nature of human beings! For in it all we may miss the great God of Christ who is still seeking to make us know that

They who wait ~~xxxxx~~ for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings as eagles
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.