

Become Something New

Pop psychologist Leo Buscaglia once said, "When you learn something new, you become something new." This is a vivid description of the benefits of learning to fly.

Students, in the throes of flight training, are constantly undergoing profound changes personally. They're becoming something new with each flight because of the unique perspective aviation offers. If you've ever looked for a reason to fly, continue flying, or involve someone else in flying, you've found one—a good one, too. The opportunity for personal transformation is reason enough to invest in earning a pilot license. All the other great benefits are a bonus.

It's indisputable that any intensive discipline involving both mind and body produces personal growth. Learning to fly does it bigger and better, because it's a pure performance environment. In the first Star Wars film, Luke says to Yoda that he will try and do better in harnessing The Force. "Try not. Do or do not. There is no try." says the wise and wizened Yoda. And so it is in aviation. The cockpit is an educational crucible in which the irrelevancies of big talk and half-baked truths are boiled away, leaving a respect for ideas and techniques that work. Pilots, for instance, may brag about their landing prowess, but when they're on final, in a 20 knot wind, it's what they know that counts. They either do, or do not. Substance, not flash, is what aviation teaches. The direct application of knowledge and its immediate consequence help shape the way a pilot thinks. This is aviation's unique perspective.

On the other hand, consider those honorable disciplines where no clear and immediate distinction exists between ideas and their consequences. Art is one that comes to mind. It seems to me that an artist can study for years and still be uncertain as to whether or not he's producing quality work. This is especially true if he fancies Surrealism or Expressionism.

Unlike landing an airplane, there's no immediate way to know how well you're doing as a brush artist. An art expert or critic might be consulted to get an idea of a painting's quality, and even then you may not really know. Many renowned artists became so only in their later years or after their deaths. I can tell how good a landing is just by seeing if the tires are still smoking, there's a dent in the runway, or an ambulance has been called.

In my high school art class, when the teacher asked what type of painting I wanted to learn, I said, "Cave painting." I figured that I could at least do a better job drawing a buffalo than some Neanderthal named Trog who hadn't made it to the ninth grade. Unfortunately, there were no caves where I lived, so I had to drop the class. The point here is that if you fly, you can't lie. You can't kid anyone, nor can you kid yourself, about well you fly an airplane. If you show up in a neck brace or have your aviation insurance cancelled, you must confront the fact that you need more landing practice.

As a flight instructor, I often see the remarkable changes that flying lessons bring about for my students. One student, in particular, comes to mind. Mona was a young woman who had to sneak out of the house to take flying lessons. Her demonstrative and hyper-insecure husband forbade her participation in anything that even smacked of personal development. (He was an ex police officer who would walk around the house in boxer shorts, sporting a gun belt while packing a megaphone. Word had it that he would march around the house with his megaphone yelling things such as, "Return to your rooms, there's nothing to see," and "You have the right to remain silent....")

The first few lessons, Mona demonstrated the behavior typical of young men and women deprived of confidence-building opportunities. She was reluctant to act on and apply her knowledge, make decisions, and trust her judgment. In short, she had little faith that she could exercise control over her environment

(although she knew how to defend against a billy club and had developed a resistance to the effects of pepper spray). Flying lessons changed this.

Flying lessons offer every student the opportunity to achieve success, Mona took every advantage of that opportunity. She became a goal achieving machine. To her, the aphrodisiac of accomplishment was overwhelming. From one lesson to the next, she set her crosshairs on achieving a new level of skill. Each lesson increased her confidence. With 45 logged flight hours and a private pilot's license in hand, Mona was quite different from the person who began training just months earlier. Erupting in self respect, she had become something new.

Now more than willing to accept new challenges, Mona went on to test herself with spins, acrobatic flight and mastery of high performance airplanes. Word had it that she even leased an airplane for several months?also known as the "Mona Lease"?to develop her cross country skills by traveling around the western United States . She became more self-reliant, more poised, more self assured at controlling the events in her life. Piloting several thousands pounds of sheet metal filled her with a sense of mastery. With her newly acquired aerobatic knowledge, she finally took her husband, Mr. Testosterone himself, on his first flight. I would have given anything to have been the unseen observer on that flight. Can you just imagine how thick the love was in that cockpit? No doubt Mona began her preflight briefing with, "Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly." After liftoff, Mona's hubby probably raised his megaphone and blurted, "Return to the earth, there's nothing to see here...besides, it's cold in these boxer shorts."

The late actor and pilot, Lloyd Haynes, understood how profoundly flying changes people. As an advocate of aviation's transcendent potential, he personally funded pre-solo flight training for recalcitrant, underprivileged and delinquent youths. These youngsters had seldom tasted the fruits of goal achievement and of success. Flying changed that for these youngsters, who for the first time in their lives could see the results of their hard work, dedication and commitment. For most of the young people involved, these lessons culminated in a solo flight.

Haynes also understood human nature. He soloed these youngsters on his budget, but if they wanted to continue their training, they had to pay for it themselves. He understood that people tend to appreciate something more if they earn it.

Flight instructors originally involved with Haynes tell me that rates of recidivism were the lowest of many competing non-aviation personal development programs. The last I heard, two of the program's participants had become airline pilots.

If a success-achieving mentality was the only thing flight training offered, that would be enough. It offers much more. Flight training teaches discipline. Above and beyond the basic discipline a pilot learns, one concept stands out as fundamental: *Never stop flying the airplane* . No more meaningful capsulation of the greater wisdom—that you never give up—exists in aviation. It takes discipline to implement this rule. Despite distractions of immense emotional proportions, pilots learn they can't give up when things get uncomfortable. The importance of this rule is implicit in every daily experience a pilot has. If someone were to ask how they could justify flight training to earn a pilot's license if they couldn't afford to fly often, I'd say that even when they're not flying, they'd still be using their flight training skills every day.

Another student example in support of these ideas comes to mind. Henry was 16 years old, failing in school, but intelligent. His difficulty was with *attention deficit disorder (ADD)* , at least that's what the school counselor suggested. Plans were made to move Henry to a special class for treatment (we called it *reform school* back then). Henry's concerned and insightful father had different ideas.

Henry's father had earned a private pilot certificate some 20 years earlier. He knew that learning to fly could have profound effects on the way someone thinks. As a final act of desperation, he gathered sufficient funds to offer his son flying lessons up to the point of soloing. Henry's father hoped that flight training would produce a positive change in the young man. Henry was thrilled.

I put him through 15 hours of flight training. Through no great skill of my own?I just gave Henry a chance to be successful at something?the demands of flight helped him develop discipline and awakened his latent ability to concentrate. If there is a more dramatic personal change story to tell, I do not know of it. Henry not only survived, he also thrived in the cockpit. Not once did I witness any of the classic symptoms of ADD.

Oh sure, at first I had to use some special motivation techniques to reinforce Henry's success. During a landing, for instance, I might have said, "Henry, that was great. You're missing the runway closer now." But after just a few lessons, Henry was inspired. For the first time in his teenage life he found something he was excited about doing and willing to work hard a to accomplish. Flight training provided an excellent metaphor for his personal growth. After soloing in 15 hours, Henry was somehow different from the person who first sat in the seat of that Cessna 150. Henry's father was please with the results.

On the day after Henry's solo, we all shook hands and parted company. Ten years later, I was walking across the airport tarmac to board an airliner in Ft. Lauderdale , Florida . As I passed by a gaggle of Boeing 737 aircraft, I heard someone saying, "Rod, hey Rod." At first I thought this was an FAA ramp check, until I looked up and saw Henry in the right seat of one of the parked 737s. My first instinct was to say, "Henry? Henry? Get out of that cockpit and back to your seat before the real pilots show up." It was immediately obvious that Henry *was* the real pilot?copilot, that is. He was part of the crew. Proudly striped, his epaulets were ornamental testimony that he had earned a place in the cockpit of a major airliner. He'd earned a lot more in his life.

Henry's counselor was wrong. Henry didn't have an attention deficit disorder, he simply hadn't had a chance to develop the discipline necessary to do better in life, much less in school. Admittedly, my evidence is only anecdotal, my conclusion not subject to the rigors of the scientific method and my sampling technique is statistically invalid. But I'm convinced that flight training had something to do with Henry's success. In my mind, Henry's counselor, although well intentioned, probably suffered from CDD, otherwise known as Counselor Diagnostic Disorder. Fortunately, CDD is one of those maladies that's easily curable. I would simply prescribe flying lessons. It worked for Henry, and it might also work for the counselor.

Flight training presents us with opportunities for personal development far beyond those offered by most other activities. It certainly affected Mona, Henry and many, many others in a profound way. For them, the cockpit became a place where they learned to think, where they learned to rely on themselves, where they developed their strengths and managed their weaknesses. It became a place where they learned, and became something new.

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