

In Sputnik We Trust

Thom Potter

It is a warm, windy day. The sky is hazy and there are about ten thousand people here at March Air Base. I'm here helping KATY-FM promote our radio station as we watch the air show. I remember these shows as a child. They are one of the few memories I have of my own father. He took me to these shows when it was at El Toro in Tustin. Then, I was about ten years old and incredibly impressed with the spectacle of it all.

Of course, it is now almost thirty years later. I am still impressed no, more so. You see, I now understand better, the sort of physics involved. The spectacle no longer has much effect on me - been there, done that, have the T-shirt. For me, these aren't just airplanes having fun in the air. The pilot, seated in a machine, is playing with the forces of Nature. Anything untoward - mechanical failure, pilot's misjudgment, an unexpected gust of wind - and I may become part of the next news cast.

Yes! This whole relationship of humanity playing with nature is a spectacle. Even as I watch a vintage biplane, suspended a hundred meters, just dangling from its propeller as though it dreamed of being a helicopter, and this was a brief fulfillment of that fantasy. The whole audience is awestruck, as these vessels of the air cartwheels and flips and loops through the air, seeming to defy the forces of nature - no, the forces of gravitation. Are they challenging the Earth, or is she playing with them, enjoying their play as a mother watches over her toddlers in the playground?

Then I think, "If it were not for war, this spectacle might not be happening." Yes, the airplane is the result of some bored geniuses, with too much free time on their hands. They found answers to sustained flight that da Vinci had only ventured upon. But, it was two great wars that forced the science of aeronautics into the advanced stages I am watching this afternoon.

I wish that war were not a condition of society. I would hope that ten thousand years of social evolution would send us a better means to resolve our differences with our neighbors. Yet, most of our technology has evolved out of the hunt, whether the prey is another animal or another human.

We have gone from stone knives, a feat in its own right, to the martial marvels of this air-show. Our ballistic science has grown from violent heaving of the closest stone, to the graceful hurtling of slings and arrows and rockets that slam into buildings with deadly accuracy. Those are the rockets that make the common cell-phone possible by hurtling satellites into orbit about the Earth.

Perhaps a more subtle result of our conflicts is the art of diplomacy. The nations who can do the most martial damage are feverishly struggling to find new ways to resolve disagreements. I have heard a definition of diplomacy as the ability to tell someone to go to Hell, in such away that the person looks forward to the trip.

As I prepare for a teaching credential, I find myself considering ways to be diplomatic. There are too many stories of teachers being chewed-out for a student's failure. In truth, a teacher can only do so much with so many students. Help! Help from the parents, who are, themselves, over taxed with the responsibilities of adulthood. The teacher gets caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, (an old nautical phrase). The devil is the responsibility of preparing a reasonable curriculum that prepares a student for the demands of college and work. I want to give my students the ability to think for themselves. Sending them to the library on their own, or asking them to finish an assignment at home, is not much different from what college would expect, or business for that matter. The deep blue sea are the parents who have no time or no desire to help their children with

subjects that may be over their heads. I have even heard reports of teachers being reprimanded for sending too much homework home. (Would an employee be reprimanded for the same thing?)

As I casually look over the pilots, whose aerial ballet has probably made Aerial a bit jealous, I cannot help but notice that most of them are over forty. I wonder if my students will know what a biplane is. Will they understand the physics that it took to perform such pirouettes? Will they know how to research the answer, if I ask them that question? Will I lose my job because I asked them to? These pilots have danced in the heavens for my entertainment. How can I thank them for it?

I will ask my students to research (a college skill) and write (a corporate skill) about these machines, or their martial ancestors. But, will I be reprimanded for sending homework home? Often, as I study, and try to make sense of the subjects I'm studying, one thought wanders into my head. I could make a gazillion bucks in corporate America. There, I would know where I stand, that my knowledge is my job. My creativity and experience will be rewarded. As a teacher, I fear, my pay won't be so good, and my creativity and experience won't go unpunished. If it was not for the drive, the passion I have for this job, I might take the road that is less risky.

About fifty years ago the Soviet Union launched a hunk of metal into orbit. They had achieved a level of technology that America was still trying to figure out. Because of Sputnik a cry rang across America like the shot heard around the world. The question that motivated public policy was, "Why can't Johnny read?" Head start and Dr Suisse are the legacies left us from the struggle to answer that call. But now, we are sending probes to Mars that fail to thrive. I suppose that if China were to send some astronauts to Mars tomorrow, and start to colonize, our politicians will ask, "Why can't Johnny do physics?" Well, I hope that we have another Sputnik, soon.