

A shout for our flight attendants!

July 21, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

Legendary American comic Jonathan Winters continues to entertain folks via clips of his work on Youtube. One of my favorite Winters skits is the one in which he plays an airline pilot under review by a supervisory board. The question at hand is whether the board should allow the pilot to continue flying after a series of mishaps, and so on.

In the end, the board's representative says to Winters, "We've put you through your paces, and we've decided to let you continue flying." Winters bursts into a cherubic smile and says, "Bless you."

Then comes the clincher. The board fellow adds: "As a stewardess."

The skit is decades old, and of course shows its age. It is in black and white, not color, for example. We no longer joke about irresponsible drinking, but Winters does that here. We all know it is "flight attendants" now. "Stewardesses" got booted out of the lexicon years ago.

The story of the crash landing of Asiana flight 214 on July 6 in San Francisco continues to hold international interest for many reasons. One of those reasons is the attention the flight attendants on that flight are rightfully receiving for their cool nerves and heroism.

The crew numbered 12, and the flight carried nearly 300 passengers, all of whom had to be evacuated within 90 seconds amid chaos and flames at the scene. At least 6 of the flight attendants suffered injuries carrying out their duties.

How easy it is to take some things or some people in life for granted. We become accustomed to our usual routines, and immune, somehow, to basic realities that truly deserve our attention. I must confess that high on the list of situations and issues in my life I rarely think about are safe flights and the virtues of flight attendants.

Well, that is not entirely true.

College instructors everywhere meet and teach students who eventually become flight attendants. I am no exception. I write letters of recommendation every year for a few of these young friends as they go through the rigmarole of landing jobs with various airlines. And that's the word for it, rigmarole,

given all the hoops these people have to successfully jump through before they're hired.

For years I've said a quiet prayer every day, asking for peace of mind and safety from above for the thirty or so students I've taught who I know are now flying the skies as they serve others.

But until the Asiana 214 crash-landing occurred, I hadn't thought all that much about what flight attendants must do for us in moments of grave danger. Like most of us, I suspect, I've rather mostly glanced here and there at the people skills with which we tend to associate these special persons in life.

I've thought of things like courtesy and attention to minute detail in public service. I've thought of soft voices and quick, steady hands in passing out cups of coffee and dispensing meals. I've thought of course of physical appearance, of smiles that dazzle or eyes that on occasion beguile. I've wondered at times, too, about life style. How do flight attendants stay patient in such tight working quarters, and under such public scrutiny for such long hours? How do they manage to ever eat and sleep normally, given their work schedules?

Now I am newly aware of questions related to spirit and psychology in the work of flight personnel.

In those final moments before take-off and landing, what are the specific steps these good people run through in their minds, the steps they must take when disaster occurs? What especially are flight attendants mindful of as they offer assistance to children, to the elderly, to persons with exceptional needs? How do they cope with fear and personal anxieties that they must shove aside to be all they can be for others? There is much to contemplate here.

If it's all right with you, I'll still laugh at the genius of Jonathan Winters. A life without a sense of humor is no life at all. From now on, however, I'll try to be a bit more mindful than I usually am of the professionalism, the quiet dedication, and the generosity of spirit of our flight attendants.

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