

Going Home

I believe it was when the phone dropped that it came to me forcefully that I was nowhere near home. Thinking back though, I should have seen the signs when the lights in the airport terminal were dimmed and I sat there contemplating the quiet.

I had arrived at the Cincinnati airport after my flight from Dayton had been canceled. I had been offered, and grabbed at, a flight that would get me home to Albuquerque sooner than I had expected. And I enjoyed the hour drive through the Ohio countryside. Things were looking up. Then my 9:00 evening flight was moved to 11:00. The ticket agent was very cheerful about it. Later that night, I, and dozens of other travelers, watched as our departure time slipped ... 11:35 ... 12:05 ... 12:25. I had to find a little space to stretch out. I dumped my gear along a wall that was out of the way around a corner. I had more than an hour to kill and thought to write some emails or accomplish some work that would be waiting for me tomorrow in any case. And then, as I said, the lights dimmed.

Disbelief slowly crept through me as I walked back to my departure gate. I would be departing alright, but not by plane. The expressionless and unyielding message board proclaimed the same message as did the absence of people.

FLIGHT DW745 HAS BEEN CANCELED.

No more. No less. I glanced at the time. 10:20. Now what? A janitor came around the corner. I walked toward her, not having had any better idea. Fortunately, she was talking with the ticket agent I had seen earlier who had periodically and sympathetically updated our departure times. He turned to me, seemingly surprised that anyone would be wandering his halls. "*Were you going to Albuquerque?*" The use of the past tense was not lost on me. I was suddenly tired. I managed to hear some of his instructions – *baggage area ... turn right ... table set up ... hotel* – but mostly I was thinking of home, which was now very very far away.

As I lay on the bed, on the phone with airline re-ticketing, I thought about the two and half hours it took to get there.

PLEASE STAY ON THE LINE. A REPRESENTATIVE WILL BE WITH YOU SHORTLY.

The ticket agent had been very nice as she handed me vouchers for a hotel room and meals. I had to ask three times for her to explain my situation. I was to head for the hotel shuttle area and wait. The meal tickets would be honored at most nearby locations. Once at my hotel I should call the airline 800 number and reschedule my trip.

WE APPRECIATE YOUR BUSINESS. PLEASE STAY ON THE LINE.

At curbside I came upon the throngs of travelers that had gone on before me. This was going to take some time. I milled around trying to get the lay of the land. Shuttle buses for

parking facilities and hotels were arriving and leaving at a wild pace. Hungry weary people were taking every opportunity to beat their neighbor an open door. Tempers were short.

DID YOU KNOW THAT DELTAWEST OFFERS NONSTOP FLIGHTS TO KUWAIT?

Funny. I had yet to see a shuttle for my hotel. I retreated to the baggage claim area to get some space. I called my wife. I sat down and closed my eyes. Then, sirens. There outside was a police car with lights blazing, suddenly cutting off the stream of shuttles. Oh well. I didn't suppose there was much hope of simply finding a hotel, getting a new flight, and going to bed.

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT OUR DELTAWEST FREQUENT FLYER PROGRAM?

Later I noticed the "shuttle" for my hotel come by. It was a six passenger van. The milling crowds seemed to mock its puny efforts. Numb, I resigned myself to my fate. The driver called out that he would return in ten minutes.

DELTAWEST OFFERS MORE FLIGHTS TO EUROPE THAN ANY OTHER AIRLINE.

Thirty minutes later the shuttle made another pass. Fortunately, I see that several hotels are involved and the crowds are slowly disappearing. I estimate that another two trips might just do it for me, that's one more hour. I might as well call the Delta 800 number now. Phone reception was intermittent and I had to give up.

PLEASE STAY ON THE LINE. YOUR CALL IS IMPORTANT TO US.

Three trips later, I was on the shuttle with the only other holdout traveler. We seem to have been two of the few to gladly stand back so that families with young children and people in wheelchairs might go first. It seemed natural for the three of us to strike up a conversation. But I was immediately drawn to the other traveler. He is a native of Iceland out in the US on business. I quizzed him on the language and culture as much as I could for the dozen minutes we had together. We talked about the Icelandic Sagas. I thought to myself that I have a saga of sorts in the making right here and now.

DELTAWEST IS COMMITTED TO YOUR SATISFACTION AND SAFETY.

So there I lay, in an old hotel room that reeks of cigarette smoke, waiting for someone to take me off hold and show me the golden shining path home. After all, DeltaWest is committed to my satisfaction, and my call is important to them. And then, as I said, I dropped the phone. In stunned disbelief I pick it up only to find that butter-side-down is a universal rule transcending mere mishandling of toast. The phone has hung itself up.

It was then that I nearly broke. It was just after one o'clock in the morning. I quelled at the thought of calling back. I stepped outside. I noticed a nice new Holiday Inn just across the parking lot. Maybe, just maybe, they might have a room still available. It was not to

be. I headed back to my hole and dialed the 800 number. Busy. I stepped outside again and walked around the hotel. I dialed again and was put on hold. Twenty five minutes later I was able to arrange for a flight home. I would be leaving at 1:29 the next afternoon. Then, I went to bed.

Seven hours of sleep and a glass of orange juice later, my outlook was much improved. Still, I would be getting home 22 hours later than originally planned. The same driver took me to the airport that had picked me up earlier that morning. We took his car. I've always had a difficult time with south Asian accents so interpreting his speech kept me pretty busy. He did pull one surprise on me. He asked if I was familiar with the Kentucky Derby. Of course. "Well," he said, pointing to our right, "there is the racecourse." And there it was. If you had asked me where the track was I would not have thought much about "next to the Cincinnati airport" as a viable answer.

As we drove past the horse stables and track, I thought about the freedom that those horses must feel as they let loose and sprint for all they are worth. And here I was, at the mercy of schedules, mechanics, and weather. And yet, the horses are confined to an oval. I made a mental note to remind myself not to run in circles.

At the airport I checked in for my new flight without incident. I noticed that the flight time was just as advertised. It all seemed too easy somehow. I stood in the security screening lines for what seemed like the twentieth time in the last three days. I was a seasoned air traveler. I had my routine down. Shoes. Computer. Keys. Wallet. Change. Bag of liquid personal grooming products. Two bins. Two bags. Boarding pass in hand. Walk through the metal detector. Bag of liquid personal grooming products. Change. Wallet. Keys. Computer. Shoes. I felt like I'd accomplished something worthwhile.

By 1:30 I was on the plane. That in itself was such a novelty of late that it made the 15 minute delay seem routine, almost a welcome comfort.

I don't remember much about the return trip through Atlanta, even though I had four hours to wander Concourse B. But I do remember Michaela. I had found a seat in the sun, and was enjoying my sandwich, when a large family descended on the empty seats and floor all around me. I wasn't bothered in the least and was glad that they had no reservations about the action. A little girl of about two worked her way through the relatives. "Michaela, here's some spaghetti." "Michaela, sit here." "Michaela, come back." As she passed from group to group, she would flash her smile my way, sometimes using my knee as a prop. Michaela had nothing but trust and happiness. So did all of her family. No one kept her away from me. No one apologized for her use of me as a brace. This is as it should be.

There was one other interesting happening before my flight left from Atlanta. The announcements at my gate were repeated in Spanish. Just for our flight. Just the Albuquerque flight. Suddenly home seemed a whole lot closer. On the plane I listened to the hum of conversation.

Occasional words found me that began to underline my nearness to home again. Cerrillos. Santa Fe. UNM. El Dorado. Atalaya. Placitas. I was on my way home. I really was.

And now, as the plane descends into the Rio Grande Valley, I am reflecting on the thought that the only flight that came and went on time was the one, days ago, that took me away from home. Just as with the prodigal son of old, the paths that lead us from home may be more difficult to backtrack than we imagine. And yet, it is always worth going home, no matter how difficult.

Tom Asaki
en route, ATL to ABQ
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