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Getting to the Airport on Time

There are two kinds of people in the world. One kind likes to get to the airport at the last possible minute and board the plane as they are closing the door. The other kind likes to get to the airport in plenty of time, relax, buy a newspaper, get some coffee, and think about the meaning of life.

The first type – let's call them Latecomers – are driven by the idea that any time spent in an airport is an utterly wasted part of their life. They have more important things to do that mostly can't be done in airports, like sleep an extra 10 minutes in their own bed or remodel the kitchen.

The second type – let's call them Earlycomers – are driven by fear of missing the flight and a belief that calmly sitting in an airport is always better than anxiously racing to one.

These two views of air travel can not be reconciled. It's the Middle East of air travel. One side tries to convert the other. Neither will give an inch. And problems occur when both types must travel together.

It often boils down to who is "in charge" of the travel, usually the one who is driving. When the Latecomer is driving, the Earlycomer sits in the passenger seat fidgeting, fuming and getting an ulcer. When the Earlycomer is driving, the Latecomer sits in the passenger seat loudly complaining about leaving too early. Rarely is there a drive to the airport without some kind of emotional turbulence.

Now, in the interest of full disclosure, I must confess to being an Earlycomer. I hate to be late for anything, and yes, this may be an obsession requiring professional help. I also don't mind sitting in the airport reading, drinking coffee and staring mindlessly into space. So I always try to get to the airport an hour and a half before my flight.

The other benefit of coming to the airport early is that you have time to deal with the unexpected. And there is plenty that's unexpected in air travel these days. Beyond weathering the occasional traffic jam, one must deal with the whims of the Transportation Safety Administration. They might, for example, decide that on this day they are going to inspect everyone's socks for explosives and at the same time check for proper foot hygiene. To help finance this, the work that day is sponsored by "Fast Actin Tenactin" with posters and free samples all around. You worry about the day they get Preparation H as a sponsor.

So, air travel is unpredictable. This fact is taken in stride by the Latecomers. I must admit that I admire their ability to say cool under pressure. Sure the plane is leaving in 10 minutes from a concourse two miles away. But, "Don't worry. We'll get there." is all they have to say. And the maddening part of it is that they are almost always right. We do get there in time. It may be the last possible moment when they're announcing "Final call

for Flight 237. Any remaining passengers better get their sorry asses over here right away.” Latecomers rarely miss flights, and this infuriates Earlycomers because it allows the Latecomers to gloat. “See I told you we’d make it.” Latecomers never tire of telling their Earlycomer companions that their fretting and complaining was completely useless, and why don’t you wake up and smell the lack of time for coffee.

When I first started traveling heavily for work, I traveled with my dear friend Frank, who could be the poster child for Latecomers. Not only would he get to the airport at the last possible moment. But he would then go immediately to the bank of pay phones (this was before cell phones) and begin catching up on his messages. There were many times when the gate attendants practically had to drag him onto the airplane. When the geography of my stomach is someday revealed by autopsy, there will be a whole mountain range of ulcers named for him. The truth is that I miss traveling with him, except for the airport part.

My latest experience with the cultural gulf between Early and Latecomers is my dear wife Terry. I love Terry. She is a wonderful person, and the best thing that ever happened to me. But she is a Latecomer. In fact, Terry and Frank could appear together on the Latecomer’s poster. I am almost always “in charge” of the travel because I travel a lot for work and usually make the reservations. So I know all the things that can go wrong, like TSA sock inspections. And I do my best to respectfully encourage Terry, support and cajole Terry, in fact everything short of psychotic rage to get Terry out the door on time. It never fails that we make the flight and Terry stashes away yet more evidence that I am a raving lunatic.

So I am thinking of forming a support group for Earlycomers. We would be guided by the twelve steps of getting to the airport on time. We would tell stories. We would provide support and encouragement. We would validate and affirm our earlycoming selves. And we would all get to the meetings an hour and a half before they started.

- Mark Friedman