

My first post-pandemic flight was a bumpy ride

I murmured my prayers, counted my breaths, and got through it.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [July 28, 2021](#) issue



(Photo © Jetlinerimages / E+ / Getty)

This is a summer of firsts. The first time we've seen our parents, our children, or our grandchildren since the pandemic began. The first hug from a friend we've seen only on Zoom. The first meal in a restaurant. The first indoor worship service. The first trip to the airport, the first flight.

A friend and colleague of mine who used to work in the United Arab Emirates recently wrote to me from the plane on her first visit back, ecstatic. She was looking forward to so many firsts: the first time to see her friends, the first time to eat the

food she's missed, the first time to see the dolphins leaping in the sea since arriving in New England mid-pandemic. "I'm on the plane!" she wrote, the fizz of her joy reaching me thousands of feet below on the ground.

Her message, with its report of people moving around the world again, brought me close to tears. But the thought of returning to the air also sent a shiver through me. As much as I long to travel, I've been dreading my first flight. I'm not a great flier in any circumstances—more of an armrest-clencher, the person you notice grimacing at every bump in the air. But as vaccinations went up and COVID cases went down over these last months, my first flight loomed—one I had been due to take in mid-March of 2020, postponed until June, and then postponed again to the following June. Fifteen months after I was meant to board the plane, I finally flew to Houston to meet a commitment made long ago.

The flight was bumpy, and I murmured my prayers, counted my breaths, and got through it. But as visceral as the fear of falling through space was and is, what really stuck with me was the experience of time that can only be had on airplanes. To be in Kentucky at lunchtime, Chicago midafternoon, and Houston in the evening of the same day felt both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Moving swiftly over different landscapes and through different weathers, the accents changing with each arrival and departure—I hadn't experienced time like this since before things shut down last year.

I remember those first weeks after the shutdown, how each day felt indistinguishable from every other. For some, this meant work never ended; for others, it meant work disappeared. Either way, time threatened to turn into an unforgiving block, with no doors or windows opening onto new possibilities.

Fortunately, the chaplains among us began responding to the pandemic's twisting of our experience of time by offering Zoom calls on the spiritual practices that might help us navigate it. I think with gratitude about Bucknell University chaplain Kurt Nelson, among others, who opened space week after week for participants to share the practices that were grounding them in the weeks after the lockdowns began. I benefited from listening to many a rabbi discuss the importance of keeping a meaningful sabbath each week, learned from Buddhist teachers how meditation could help to slow down the sped-up anxious feeling so many of us were carrying in our chests, heard from Christian monks how praying the Divine Office could help us find our way into the present moment through the slow reading of ancient texts.

“Teach us,” the psalmist says, “to number our days.” We tried to learn from one another how to count the days as they passed, and the hours within them, without panicking about where the hours and days were heading.

Time often feels like the thing that marks our distance from God. God is eternal; we are mortal. God’s word, spoken in the beginning, still reverberates; our words strike the air and immediately begin to fade.

But God is a God of time as well as eternity. We meet God within time, and it is within time that we are able to change. It is within time that we can stop, turn, and begin again—within time that we might find new directions in which to move.

On a plane, though, there’s no direction other than the one in which the plane is going, no way to make the turbulence subside, no way to ensure a smooth landing. When we landed in Houston, our plane hit the tarmac like a hand slapping a table: *wham*. I was sitting next to an elderly woman whose language I didn’t speak nor she mine, and, masked, we’d been communicating silently with our eyes when we needed to retrieve something from a stowed bag or scoot out of our row into the aisle. When the plane smacked down onto the runway hard enough to rattle my teeth, I suddenly became aware of another of this summer’s firsts: the feel of my seatmate’s cool, delicate hand in mine. For 15 socially distanced months, I’d experienced nothing quite like it, and even after hurtling through the sky at hundreds of miles an hour, her touch made time stand still for a moment. I felt held, as I hope she did, by the God who moves with us through the river of time. Our times, the psalmist says, are in God’s hand, but it is often the touch of a stranger offering comfort that helps us know it.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “First flight.”