



By Sally E. Smith

Fear of Flying

Welcome to the *unfriendly* skies

DURING MY FREQUENT cross-country jaunts in the late '80s and the early '90s, I wasn't so much a "white-knuckle flier" as a "paralyzed passenger." My anxiety began to climb long before the airplane did; hauling my suitcase out of the closet was enough to make me twitchy.

My panic didn't revolve around the plane crashing (though I did visualizations of protective white light surrounding the plane and repeated the mantra, "The pilot doesn't want to die. He will do everything he can to make sure we're safe."). No, my fears centered on the potential nightmares of flying as a super-size passenger. What if the plane was full and I had to squeeze myself into my seat and keep my arms crossed during the entire flight? What if my seatmate was a sadistic fatphobe who would lean on our shared armrest just to see me wince in pain as it dug into my hip? What if I was seated in the bulkhead, where the armrests were stationary? What if I felt humiliation by passengers whose faces were masks of horror when they thought they were seated

next to me, followed by relief washing over their faces when they realized their seat assignments were in rows behind me? What if I wasn't given my seat belt extender before the plane headed down the runway? What if, after the flight, I ended up with bruises on my body because the service cart going up the aisle rammed into me? What if the ticket agent, the gate agent or the flight attendant wouldn't let me on the plane?

Some may think me paranoid, but the unfortunate truth is that all of these experiences, with the exception of not being allowed on the plane, happened to me more than once during my early years of flying. Prior to the flight, my anxiety level would be off the charts, the flight itself made me miserable and the aftereffects bruised both my body and psyche.

Along the way, I learned some survival strategies: When booking my flight, I made sure I did not have a seat assignment in the bulkhead area. I reserved an aisle seat so I'd have room to lean over. I pre-boarded (along with the families with small children) so I could

get seated and raise the armrest in defiance of any potential seatmate who would try and squish me. I asked for a seat belt extender when I boarded the plane. For intercontinental flights, I would even throw myself at the mercy of the flight attendant, and wait at the back of the plane until everyone else was seated, praying to the Airline Goddess that there would be two empty seats together.

But after a few years of living through increasingly severe panic attacks, I decided enough was enough. So, I began to buy two seats on every flight I booked. (Why not just upgrade to first class? Well, two coach seats provide more room than one first class seat, they're generally cheaper than one first class seat, and, depending on the plane's configuration, first class tray tables don't fit, while it's easy to flip down the tray table of the second seat in coach.) Amazingly (or not), my panic attacks disappeared.

I soon discovered, though, that buying two seats presents its own set of challenges. I can't count the number of times reservation

agents have been flummoxed about how they should book two seats for one person (I quickly became “Passenger 1: Sally Smith;” “Passenger 2: Extra Smith”). The gate agents cheerfully inform me that my seat assignments are, for example, 16A and 21C (I’ve always considered myself clever, but I haven’t yet figured out a way to split my body in two). Some are simply unable to wrap their minds around the thought that one person would buy two seats. I still chuckle when I think of the Newark gate agent who took my boarding passes, then asked me where the other person was. I informed him that I had purchased two seats, and started walking down the jetway. He turned around and asked again. I told him that both seats were for me and kept walking. He yelled at me to stop and insisted that I get the other person. I screamed back at him, “I’m FAT and I need TWO SEATS!” That shut him up.

Then there are the passengers who are intent upon placing their carry-ons on or under my second seat, even after I inform them that I bought both seats. And, in their ceaseless attempt to shoehorn as many passengers as possible into an airplane, there are the flight attendants who repeatedly attempt to seat one last passenger in my second seat.

Lastly, my pet peeve: Although I routinely buy two seats when I fly, I invariably only receive frequent flier miles for one. The airlines’ convoluted logic is that I’m only one person, so I am only entitled to frequent flier miles for one seat.

From a political perspective, I have historically taken the position that, if it were a perfect world, airlines would sell passage for one person, rather than selling 16” of space on an airplane. The supposed increased cost of transporting people of size would be balanced by the (logically-speaking) decreased cost of transporting children and the Calista Flockharts of the world. After all, we purportedly live in a society that prides itself on equality, and, as a society, we go to great expense to ensure that our citizens’ needs are accommodated. We cut curbs at the edges of sidewalks and build ramps for wheelchair accessibility, we install audio signals at crosswalks so that the sight-impaired know when it’s safe to walk and we provide multi-lingual workers so that people who don’t

speaking English can have access to the education, goods and services that those of us who speak English have. Airlines already provide special services for children travelling alone, senior citizens needing wheelchair transportation assistance, musicians with cellos, and dogs and cats. The extra costs associated with those services are amortized and each flier pays a few cents more. So asking the airlines to provide a row or two of larger seats in each airplane or to allow a larger person to sit next to an empty seat doesn’t seem too much to ask.

Critics quick to jump to the airlines’ defense point out that larger people are different. In so many words, detractors say that it’s our fault that we’re plus size or supersize and that we should suffer the consequences of our inferred gluttony. As for the other groups of people who are accommodated, they’re not responsible for their conditions. The breakdown in the logic of this argument (aside from debunking the gluttony myth by outlining the science behind the complex physiology of weight regulation) is that some people who receive accommodations are responsible for their condition. We don’t have a litmus test for people in wheelchairs, for example, to prohibit those who became paralyzed because they crashed their cars while driving drunk from using ramps and curb cuts. Nor should we.

Clearly, when it comes to accommodations, we don’t live in a perfect world. Acknowledging this in my political perspective, I always took the position that buying two airline seats was a livable alternative, but that airlines should refund the price of the second seat if there was even one empty seat on the plane.

So I watched with more than passing interest this summer when the media picked up on an internal Southwest Airlines document reminding employees of its 1980 policy forcing larger passengers to buy two seats. Initially, it sounded as though they were enacting my livable alternative—buy a second seat but refund the cost if there was an empty seat on the flight. However, it quickly became apparent that Southwest’s enforcement of this policy represents a transportation tailspin for people of size.

Beginning on June 26, Southwest instituted a new check-in and boarding pass

system. Suddenly, skycaps, ticket agents and gate agents all became potential enforcers for the size police. Though none were trained in the diversity of supersize body shapes (some supersize bodies—all belly and no hips, for example—fit just fine in one seat), any of them had the power to decide that a passenger needed to buy a second seat. Given that my early “fear of flying” experiences are not atypical, I know in my heart that many larger people will simply choose not to travel. Anxiety about airline travel is rampant among supersize people and Southwest’s policy will have a further chilling effect on the freedom of fat people to fly.

As it turns out, Southwest’s policy of refunding the second seat is extraordinarily cumbersome. In this age of instant access to passenger records and itineraries, by the time a plane has reached its destination, a large passenger’s charge card should be credited with the purchase price of the second seat. In Southwest’s world, however, the passenger must contact the Customer Relations Department after travel is completed and file a request for a refund.

Although Southwest has repeatedly issued statements claiming that this existing policy is being enforced for the comfort of all passengers, their actions betray their profit motive. Shortly after Southwest’s June 26 launch of their new system, two supersize women were set to travel from the Bay Area to Las Vegas. They were denied boarding on a Southwest airplane until each woman bought an additional seat. Although the two friends were willing to buy a third seat and share it between them (assuring both their comfort and the comfort of other passengers on the flight), Southwest representatives insisted that the women purchase two additional seats.

Personally, I’m fuming because, in a statement published on their website (www.southwest.com), Southwest claims that, if a large customer purchases the first seat at the unrestricted full fare rate, she or he can buy the second seat at a reduced child’s fare. In all the times I’ve flown on Southwest and bought two seats, that option was never offered to me. And it certainly isn’t an option when buying tickets online.

It’s enough to get me twitchy.◆

