

The aerodynamics of fatherhood

By Jim Bradford with Scott Harrup



500-plus with elbow room



With a wingspan about the length of a football field and seating for 525 passengers on two decks, the Airbus A380 is the world's largest passenger aircraft. Only 13 have been built. In October 2007, the A380 made its inaugural passenger flight from Singapore to Sydney. The 455 passengers had to bid for their seats in a charity auction, with Julian Hayward of the U.K. bidding just over \$100,000 to be the first on board.

The next time you're on a flight, take a look out the window and watch the wing on your side of the plane. If you think commercial aircraft are rigid, metal structures, prepare to be surprised. Don't panic, but you'll see a fair degree of flexibility in your plane's wing as you take off, land, or travel through turbulence. Wings are designed to do that. They're put together with the ability to meet nature's forces head-on and adapt and function optimally.

Wings catch my attention, perhaps a little more than my fellow passengers'. Why? Somehow, in God's economy, I ended up with a Ph.D. in aerospace engineering even as I fervently pursued the Lord's calling to ministry.

Aerospace engineering follows three branches: structures (like

that of a wing), dynamics (calculating forces and motion, etc.), and fluid mechanics (the flow of liquids and gases, including things like the airflow over a wing). I never designed an aircraft, but my wing-watching skills were probably sharpened by years of staring into a centrifuge as our research team did experiments in fluid flows that we applied to large-scale weather prediction.

But back to that wing.

If you're a dad, the next time you ponder the expanse of aluminum and steel carrying you through the air, stop and think about a wonderful metaphor for parenting. Let me tell you about it.

Helping your kids to soar

Two of the more fascinating classes I took dealt with propul-

sion and airfoil theory. Those two come together in an aircraft. You can't have one without the other. The wings are built on the airfoil theory, the idea that their shape creates lift for an aircraft. But that lift is only generated with speed. So you also need propulsion, whether from a spinning prop or a jet engine.

My wife and I have two daughters, Meredith and Angeline, and I believe the Spirit of God at work in our girls' lives provides that thrust they need in order to soar. I like to picture that as the combustion of God's Word in the atmosphere of the Holy Spirit. God's Word and God's Spirit come together in the soul to give spiritual thrust.

As a dad and a committed follower of Christ, I want to invest

in my daughters countless opportunities for them to encounter God's Word and His Spirit. After they're long gone from living near me and being under my influence, I want that thrust of God's Spirit and God's Word to continue in their lives.

But if you give that thrust and there are no wings, there's not going to be any lift. If all you do is drum scriptural mandates into your children, you're just pushing them along like so many bullets.

What are the "wings" that give them lift in life? What allows them to rise above challenges and problems? What helps them achieve their potential?

I believe it is their God-given gifts. As you help your children identify and use their giftings, you help them to understand how

God has wired them and created them.

One thing I did with my girls, I took them on daddy-daughter dates every week. Dads do "buddy time" and other versions of this with their sons.

The principle is the same — my daughters needed time alone with me every week. When they were young, it might be just a half hour going out for an ice cream cone. We always had a treat. We always had something fun we could enjoy together. And those were the times when they knew they were the total focus of their dad, since I took them out individually.

Those dates are one of the best things I have done for my girls. I could create that structure of their wings by affirming them and

simply talking about what they were experiencing. I wanted them to see those wonderful traits in their lives. I wanted to verbalize their potential for them.

Today, Meredith and Angeline are in college. When they gradu-

ated high school I wrote each of them a personal letter. I wanted to affirm them as I had always tried to do during their growing-up years, but in writing, “I just believe in you,” my letters said. “Here are the wonderful qualities I see in your life.”

Your affirmation will give your son or daughter lift, the confidence that God is going to help them do great things and that they have the raw material to rise to amazing heights in life. That doesn't mean you put them on some kind of performance track where they're always afraid of disappointing you. Rather, you affirm them at every opportunity. When they succeed, you encourage them. When they struggle and fail, you don't shame or demean them.

Your children's giftings create the shape to their lives, like the shape of the wing. But within every wing are countless struts and rivets and supporting bonds. And the structure that keeps your children's gifts extended but flexible is the confidence you breathe into your children. You want

your children to go through life 24/7 with that sense of “my dad believes in me.” I know guys who are 60 years old, and they're still trying to get their dad to either like them or to be proud of them. I want my girls to have that kind of structure today.

Your children can soar when they know their dad believes in them. But that requires that you believe in your own gifts and have a solid grip on what God wants to accomplish in you.

Finding your own wings

Our culture does little or nothing to promote fatherhood. Turn on any “family” sitcom today, and you're almost certain to see a dad portrayed as the household dunce. The sarcasm and defiance depicted of kids toward fathers is profound and troubling.

In contrast with this image, I believe dads are ultimately called to model on two legs in physical form the character of our Heavenly Father. Of course, women are called to emulate the character of God as well. But in terms of the fatherhood of God — as initiator, protector and provider — ideally, the father shows all of these roles.

God the Father is, first of all, the initiator of everything that exists. Caricatures of men and of dads paint them as increasingly passive. As a father, I am called to action. When I'm imitating the character of my Heavenly Father, I don't wait for my wife to suggest that we pray for our kids. I'm the one suggesting we do that. I'm not waiting for my wife to initiate discipline for my kids. I'm willing to initiate that. I cannot be a passive parent.

God the Father is the ultimate protector and provider. I must provide a covering of security for my daughters. They should trust my initiative, the strength of

To Tokyo before lunch?

The A2, an aircraft design funded by the European Space Agency, is on the drawing board in Britain. Some 300 passengers would fly the hypersonic plane at more than 3,000 mph. In order to travel at that speed, the craft would have no windows and would run on liquid hydrogen. Even if the plane makes it off the drawing board, don't expect any flights to be available until beyond 2030.

character I bring, the strength of love I have for them. They must know I will be there for them. I've got their back. They can count on me.

Living for my Heavenly Father defines my character, defines the values of my life that don't change. Such values are not subject to time. They're not subject to popular opinion. As my daughters see that I'm living for my Heavenly Father, they decide if they will pursue that same path.

I would encourage you, if you do not have a personal relationship with God through Christ, to make that foundational decision today. Discover what it means to be forgiven and to have God's Spirit in your life. Every dad needs to experience that miraculous renewal if he's going to pass on to his kids the ability to reach their potential and overcome life's challenges.

Grab hold of God's best for you, then give your children something eternal they can focus on. Help them to connect with that dynamic propulsion of God's Spirit and God's Word. Let them soar. **tpe**

JIM BRADFORD is general secretary of the Assemblies of God. SCOTT HARRUP is senior associate editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel* and blogs at Out There (sharrup.agblogger.org).

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



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This one's got kick

The P-51 Mustang is perhaps the most famous American aircraft of World War II. The single-prop fighter was capable of speeds in excess of 400 mph and saw service into the Korean War and the early age of jet fighters. The Mustang's range allowed it to escort Allied bombers from Britain to Berlin, fight off German planes, and return. According to some car aficionados, the Ford Mustang was named after the plane originally, rather than the horse.