

DRY BONES

Marks of spiritual maturity

Lessons from my son learning to fly

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM



It seems everyone is talking about spiritual maturity these days.

Scores of books are being written on the spiritually mature man (or woman), (or church), (or pastor), (or husband),

(or wife), etc.

When certain speakers are mentioned Christians sigh and say, "Ahhhh, he's spiritually mature."

That usually means no one can understand him.

But when I ask my embarrassing questions, like, "What's spiritual maturity?" I either get puzzled looks, or angry snarls in reply. The former means "What right do you have to question?" The latter means "You're jealous because you're not spiritually mature."

However, since no one has answered my question, I'll give my own answer.

I remember the day my oldest son landed his light plane at the Melbourne airport. All summer he had been taking flying lessons at a nearby airport. That morning he had finally passed his flight exam and received his private ticket.

Flying down the coast, he landed at our big airport. Our entire family was there to meet him. I was to be his first passenger.

Bruce taxied the little Cessna 150 up to the front of the terminal and shut down the engine. I walked out on the tarmac and squeezed into the right-hand seat of the two-seat, single-engine plane.

It was broiling hot as I waited in the cockpit for him to complete his preflight checklist before starting the engine.

Memories, hundreds of them, flooded through my mind. I remembered my first flight after I completed my private exam—20 years before. That time Bruce was my first passenger, strapped tightly in the seat beside me in the little Piper J-4. His little blond head barely able to peer out the side window.

There were other memories. Flying off dirt airstrips, getting lost on cross-country flights and having to fly low so I could read the names of the towns on the water towers, being on top of the clouds and praying desperately for a hole, all those hours over

the Amazon jungle when I was writing my book on jungle pilots . . .

It had been almost two years since I had been at the controls of a small plane. When I sold my last plane I suspected I would never own another. It was just too expensive—and too time-consuming.

Now I was sitting beside my eldest son as he began his own flying career. It was a proud moment.

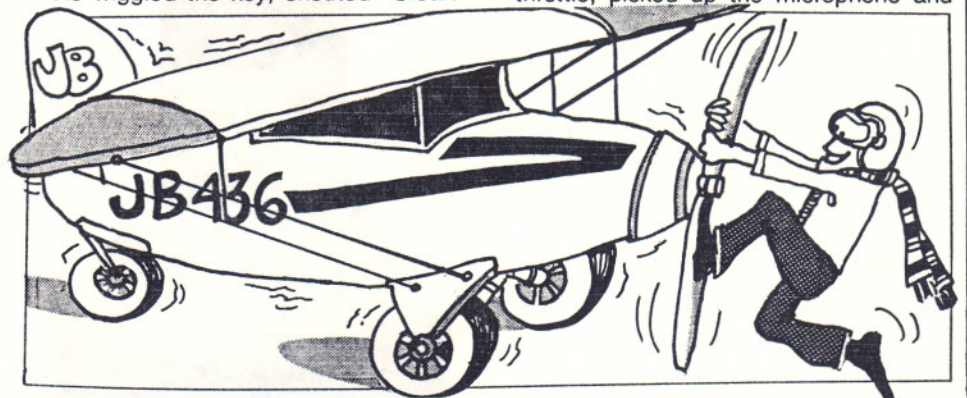
Bruce completed his preflight check, tediously pointing his finger at every instrument, checking the controls, making sure my seat belt was fastened.

"Clear!" he shouted at no one as he twisted the key in the magneto switch and punched the starter button.

But nothing happened.

Either the battery was low or the starter was stuck.

He wiggled the key, shouted "Clear!"



again, and pushed the button. The only sound was a small "click" under the cowling.

He tried several times, then looked at me apologetically. Helplessly.

"Now what, Dad?"

I knew how he felt. His mother and sisters were behind the chain link fence, watching. Several grizzled old pilots were standing around the apron, waiting to see what was going to happen.

"The planes I flew didn't have starters," I grinned. "Let me show you how the old-timers cranked up."

I unbuckled my seat belt and opened the door.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Just make sure all your switches are off," I commanded.

I stepped to the front of the plane and took the metal prop in my hands, pulled it through a couple of times then shouted:

"Turn on the master switch and give me a little bit of throttle."

A big breath. Hands on the prop. Pull down. Jump back. And the engine roared to life.

Bruce was impressed as I climbed back in the cockpit, my hair blowing in the backwash.

All the old urges were taking over. Suddenly I was a pilot again. I could hardly keep my hands off the controls.

Bruce picked up the radio mike and called ground control.

"Taxi to runway 13," the voice came back through the speaker.

"Where's 13?" Bruce said to me. I realized he was unfamiliar with the airport. But instead of giving him instructions, I automatically put my feet on the rudders and reached for the throttle. "I'll taxi out for you," I said protectively.

My son gently pushed my hand from the throttle, picked up the microphone and

once again called ground control.

"I'm unfamiliar with the airport," he said. "Can you direct me to runway 13?"

The overhead speaker crackled to life as the man in the tower gave exact directions.

I sat back. The flight belonged to Bruce, not me.

As we took off, and Bruce waggled his wings at his mom and his sisters waving below, I realized he had many years of safe flying ahead. He had exhibited the three qualities necessary to stay alive.

He recognized his limitations and had a teachable spirit.

He was not afraid to ask for help when he needed it.

He was not afraid to exert authority—even over his dad when necessary.

That may seem awful simple to some of you deep Christians—but those are the marks of maturity.