

## INTO THE DANGER ZONE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
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As I was growing up, I wanted more than anything to fly airplanes. This was a perplexing obsession for a boy in a Conservative Mennonite community. We weren't exactly early adopters on the technology front. In fact, my parents didn't have a television until after I left home, though I did prevail upon them to rent a small black and white unit to watch men land on the moon. It seemed even to my parents a worthy exception to the rule.

My favorite book as a boy was titled *Sabre Jet Ace*, a fictionalized account of the exploits of Joseph McConnell, Jr. (known as Mac), America's top fighter pilot during the Korean conflict. If I hadn't been Mennonite, and thus pacifist, I might well have eventually joined the Air Force. Instead, my parents agreed to let me take flying lessons in exchange for spending my senior year in high school at a Mennonite school in Lancaster, PA. I received my private pilot's license the day before I received my high school diploma. For me, the license was far more satisfying than the diploma.

One obvious reason for my obsession with flying was that it symbolized freedom. As a religious community and as a culture, Mennonites champion constraint and conformity. Even then, I instinctively wanted out. Flying gave me a taste of freedom. Once the wheels left the runway, I was pilot in command. I could set my own course. For a 17-year-old Mennonite kid, this was heady stuff.

The other reason for my obsession with flying, and especially with the exploits of Mac McConnell, may have been the prospect of being tested under fire. The flip side of an emphasis on conformity is an aversion to risk. As a Mennonite, I wasn't even allowed to play football, which for an overweight teenage boy in south Arkansas was the social equivalent of being incarcerated.

Flying gave me a chance to prove myself. One day my instructor sent me north from Lancaster on a solo cross-country flight to a radio beacon known as the Ravine VOR. The beacon is aptly named: it's nestled among a series of ridges and ravines that turn the air above into a churning maelstrom of mayhem. For a neophyte flyer, it feels like being a tennis ball in a clothes dryer. My first fear was that the airplane would come apart at the rivets, which it didn't—no danger of that. The real question was whether I would come apart. More than one prospective pilot had returned from a trip to the Ravine VOR and parked the plane for good. In my case, I discovered something which my instructor knew beforehand but which I didn't: that I'd make it through and emerge a pilot.

The inciting incident in the movie *Top Gun* occurs in the air above the Persian Gulf, where two F-14 Tomcat interceptors encounter two MiG fighters. The pilot of the lead F-14, played by Tom Cruise, goes by the call sign Maverick; his wingman goes by the call sign Cougar. Maverick, [initially thinking they only have one MiG in opposition] in the mistaken belief that they are facing only one MiG, splits off from Cougar and locks in on the MiG. Suddenly, a second MiG appears from the shadow of the first and locks in

on Cougar. If the encounter had escalated into a live firefight, Cougar would have been shot down.

Deeply shaken by the experience, Cougar barely makes it back to the aircraft carrier and turns in his wings shortly thereafter. Maverick heads off for advanced training at the Top Gun fighter school, knowing he has brashly violated one of the cardinal rules of combat. His actions cost his wingman his career and could have cost him his life.

The question posed by the movie is whether Maverick can harness his incorrigible individualism in a way that contributes to his salvation rather than his destruction. Not surprisingly, this question complicates Maverick's friendships and intimate relationships, as well as his conflicted memory of his late father, who was also a fighter pilot.

The theme song of *Top Gun* is a Kenny Loggins tune titled "Danger Zone." The song initially functions as a come-hither invitation from Maverick to an enemy-weapons specialist named Charlie, played by Kelly McGillis. The lyrics read, in part:

Out along the edges,  
Always where I burn to be;  
The further on the edge,  
The hotter the intensity.

Highway to the Danger Zone:  
I'll take you  
Right into the Danger Zone.

The underlying message of the song, and indeed of the movie itself, is about the location of the danger zone. It might be up in the sky, where bogeys await. It might be at home, where relationships get complicated and partners sometimes get angry. It might be in the encounter with a commander who is unreasonable or a colleague who is vindictive. It might be in finding out about a father who may have died in disgrace.

You enter the danger zone anywhere the arc of your aspirations leaves the runaway of your usual life. You don't enter the danger zone merely by saying what you want or where you wish to go. Rather, the moment of greatest danger comes when you realize what it will take to achieve liftoff. Then you have a choice: either succumb to the gravity of life as usual, or kick in the afterburners and achieve liftoff. The danger zone is where you decide whether you have what it takes to climb toward the sky.

Over the past several years, you and I have engaged in an extended conversation about who we are and what we aspire to become—with respect to both my aspirations as your minister, and your aspirations as a congregation. Two months ago, we adopted a strategic plan. The arc of our aspirations is now fixed, but we haven't taken off yet. We're in the danger zone.

At their most capacious, our aspirations seek to address the religious crisis of our time. Everywhere you look, religious fundamentalism is burgeoning. It's an emergent cancer that will bring increasingly severe political, economic, and religious devastation to our nation and our world. The only forces rising up in serious protest are the fundamentalists of the left. Their principle strategy is to argue, correctly but

inadequately, that the religious fundamentalists are wrong about the nature of God, the meaning of revelation, and the purpose of history.

Even as fundamentalism flourishes, Unitarian Universalism withers. There are about as many Unitarian Universalists in our nation today as there were in 1961 when the Unitarians and the Universalists merged into one denomination. Over the same half century, the U.S. population has increased by more than fifty percent. In other words, our numbers as a religious movement have fallen sharply, percentage-wise. Last year, the actual number of Unitarian Universalists in the U.S. declined as well.

Why has this trend continued? In the language of our congregational aspirations, we haven't clearly articulated what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. We haven't effectively spread the word. We haven't suitably described what it's like to be part of a community where you feel connected and nurtured and engaged. We haven't adequately reached out to people who might come to our congregations, but would come in different ways than we did, and for different reasons.

While fundamentalism flourishes and Unitarian Universalism withers, a third trend has emerged: spiritual hunger has deepened in our nation. People are more connected than ever, but also more lonely. They accomplish more, but with less satisfaction. They live more rapidly, but fewer experiences endure. They feel divided within themselves and isolated from other people. They feel lost and alone.

For what do they hunger? They long for a place where they can restore their sense of wholeness and regain their sense of purpose—a place like All Souls. Here, we gather to contemplate the mystery of God, interpret the wisdom of religion, and explore the insights of science. We make shared commitments and offer mutual support. Our purpose is to awaken our sense of the sacred and renew our resolve to transform ourselves and our world.

Overall, All Souls has done a respectable job—adequate in most areas and exemplary in a few—of satisfying the spiritual hunger of people who happen to find their way to us. We have the capacity, however, to respond with a larger sense of mission and a greater sense of urgency. We know we can do more, and thus we've set the arc of our aspirations.

The next step is takeoff. As we approach the moment pilots call rotation, when the nose gear rises and the wings begin to create lift, I have two concerns. The first has to do with the comfort of staying where we are. All Souls clearly has the pedigree and the potential reach the sky, but we also could rest on our laurels. We happen to have more than a few laurels sitting around. The problem is that many of the laurels we could rest upon aren't ours.

It's true that the organization which became the American Red Cross was founded by members and friends of this congregation, as were the ASPCA, Cooper Union, and The Hackley School, among others. But you and I had nothing to do with founding those organizations. It's also true that All Souls initiated the first religious response to the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, sponsoring 10,000 placards on subways and busses, imploring people to respond to AIDS victims with humanity and dignity. But relatively few of us here today had anything to do with that campaign. We cannot rest on those laurels either. It's time for us to fly on our own.

My second concern has to do with what it takes to conquer gravity. Aspirations do not take flight by themselves. They require time, and money, and commitment to give

them lift. At our congregation's annual meeting today, we'll talk about which goals we will pursue first and about making a long commitment in the same direction.

We'll also talk about money—a key factor that threatens to delay liftoff. Here's a sobering statistic: it costs \$2,750 per household per year to support All Souls' current level of program and ministry; only 83 households out of 981 gave at that level or higher in 2009. In other words, only 8 percent of the households represented here fully underwrite their presence at All Souls. This percentage has remained relatively constant over the past fifteen years. It's far too low.

As a result, our growth in staff and services has not kept pace with the growth of our membership. Today, we have a staff that is about the same size as it was when I came to All Souls, though our membership has increased by nearly fifty percent. In order to provide lift to our aspirations, we'll need many more of us to show financial leadership.

We'll also need an organizational structure that's ready to fly. For example, we need better coordination among our many programs and activities. It's hard to gain momentum when everyone's using a different runway.

Our nominating committee has long lamented the significant number of members they must ask to stand for election to the Board of Trustees in order to find five who are willing to run, knowing full well that two of them will lose. In its pursuit of willing candidates, the nominating committee has been forced to set aside the question of what combination of skills and what blend of perspectives would best lead us forward. This not a best practice among congregations today, nor has it ever been. If we are going to achieve liftoff, we'll need to address this obstacle.

We enter the danger zone when the arc of our aspirations leaves the runaway of our usual life. It's when we decide whether we have what it takes to climb toward the sky. Then we have a choice: either succumb to the gravity of life as usual, or kick in the afterburners and achieve liftoff.

For my part, I believe All Souls has the pedigree and the potential to become an exemplary congregation. We have the ability to fulfill our aspirations and satisfy spiritual hunger in a lost and lonely world. I commit myself to this endeavor, and I invite you to do the same. We cannot rest on our laurels. It's time to fly.