Keswick Reminder 25.04.25: NfWW No.85 Thinking of flying

Having generated a very considerable carbon footprint from air travel in my lifetime, I am in no position to tell other people what to do. But now that I've done with flying by choice, I would like to share some facts and some thoughts on the subject.

First and foremost we cannot escape the fact that flying – most especially long-haul flying – is by far the most climate damaging activity that an individual can undertake, bar space travel. That is simply undeniable.

According to Mike Berners-Lee in his book *How Bad are Bananas* flying from London to Hong Kong return economy class generates 3.4 tonnes of CO_2e. ('Carbon dioxide equivalent' is the standard unit of impact measurement of all greenhouse gas emissions. In the case of flying this includes the effects of contrails which double the impact of the actual gases.)

In 2023 the annual CO_2e for the UK was 5.7 tonnes per person, so in one return flight to Hong Kong a person generates 60% of the average annual UK emissions. A person taking 6 or 7 return long-haul flights in a year generates over 20 tonnes of greenhouse gases. And 'super emitters' (those who fly very frequently) each generate over 100 tonnes CO_2e annually – a truly colossal figure.

So what should we do? My advice is to be conscious of the fact that every time we board an aircraft our decision to fly at that moment carries an environmental cost (as well as a financial one), and therefore a big responsibility. Because of this, some people have joined the 'flight shame' ('*flygskam*') movement, committing never to fly. But for many this is difficult: families and close friends, scattered across continents, depend on air travel to maintain bonds.

Furthermore, cultural understanding deepens through direct experience of different societies. Developing economies rely heavily on tourism and international trade is facilitated by aviation. And academic and business relationships flourish through in-person meetings. International sport would be impossible without air travel too.

This tension creates a moral quandary without simple solutions. Total abstention from flying might seem virtuous, but impossible for many, ignoring very real human needs for connection. Conversely, unconstrained flying disregards our responsibility to future generations who will inherit the climate we're shaping today.

Thus the convenience and necessity of flying stands in direct tension with its environmental impact, forcing us to navigate complex moral terrain.

As we work our way through this, perhaps the most ethical stance involves thoughtful consideration rather than rigid absolutism. Each journey deserves deliberate reflection: Is this flight truly necessary? What value will it create? Can that value be achieved through less carbon-intensive means?

Whatever we choose to do we just have to keep in mind what I wrote in paragraph 2 to help inform our decisions.

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