

Glide Path

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Near the end of a flight, the pilot spots the tarmac, glides towards his aiming point to touch down, then continues to the gate where passengers deplane. At 95, I am keenly aware I am on a glide path, the imminence of the touchdown, and the tedium of disembarking. In my metaphor, I am not certain if I am the passenger, the pilot, or the plane. No matter, the journey must end. When I was a boy, I stepped on a nail. I didn't get a shot, the wound was medicated, and life went on. At this last leg of my journey, there is no nail, no shot, and life will not go on.

At takeoff: Bobby Lofton knocked on our front door and asked, "Is Mrs. Jackson home?"

What a silly question. Of course. She was always home. She was my mother, a housewife. Where else would she be?

Bobby said, "Mrs. Jackson, you have a phone call."

Mother walked down the street to Bobby's grandparents' house and took a call on the only phone on North Ninth Street where we lived.

Glide path: I wanted my watch face to tell the time clearly. So, I called Apple Care and talked to an Advisor, last name Abraham. He led me through multiple steps till the numbers appeared, not stylized. He visited my website: waylandjackson.com and saw the photo of me holding Dottie, the pug. He read my poems and stories and viewed my art. The Advisor was not across the street and down two houses. He was in Cairo, Egypt.

At takeoff: When I was 5 years and 7 months old, my mother decided it was time for me to go to school. There was no kindergarten, so she shuttled me off to the first grade. For the first time in my life, I encountered desks, a schoolroom, and the teacher. I didn't understand the routines, and I did not know how to conduct myself. So, when the bell rang and the students filed out, I assumed we were going home. I had not imagined recess.

The school had no fences, so I proceeded to the northeast corner of the schoolyard. As I neared the perimeter, I heard a distant voice calling, "Wayland . . . "

When I heard it the third time, it dawned on me I was making a mistake, in front of the teacher and the entire class. Everyone was watching me. To turn around at that point would have been to admit to error, to announce to the entire class my ignorance. I could not turn back, and Miss Milam could not leave the class to run after me.

Arriving at home, my mother met me at the door and asked, "What are you doing here?" She understood. I was her simple, unsophisticated child. "You're going back tomorrow," she said, and that was the end of it.

The glide path: Who would have guessed I would spend 41 years as a student and teacher? High school, university, and seminary—19 years. One year to qualify for a teacher's certificate, including a stint with the Westinghouse Learning Corporation. Then, 14 years teaching junior high English followed by seven years teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). All my students were from other countries. I taught them; I learned from them.

I relished each day of my 21 years and retired as soon as I qualified for Social Security. I'd heard of people who retired beaten and worn out. My retirement was the opposite. I was still loving each day. I chose to walk away smiling instead of sticking it out and joining the Bitter Enders Club. Proving I did not surrender to the couch, since 1985, I have published eleven books.

At takeoff: On the first day of school, I took home a list of supplies my family must buy. We took the list to the back counter at the Rexall drug store, paid the clerk, and went home with books, paper, pencils, and crayons. The school supplied the teacher, the room, and a desk, nothing more.

My uncle, in Chicago looking for work, had not sent money home, so my cousin could not buy books. Each day the teacher asked her, "Where are your books?" Like an ax striking a tree, the repeated question became so embarrassing my cousin dropped out and never returned. No one seemed to notice, or care.

Glide path: In my son's second grade class at Vang Pao Elementary in Fresno, CA, each student received a free Notebook computer and never had to bring pencil or paper to school. At one point, students struggling with math also received a handheld calculator. Why remember multiplication products? They had them in their hands. Students paid for nothing.

At takeoff: We huddled in the Model T traveling at 34 miles per hour. I always sat in the back. A few miles out of town, we spotted the home of Mrs. Todd, my fourth-grade teacher. We passed the time by guessing the state on the license plate of the next car we met. We passed no one; no one passed us. No one urged, "Go faster." The 17-mile drive took 30 minutes.

Glide path: I sat cross-legged on the living room floor watching Neil Armstrong broadcast from the moon 238,800 miles away. "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Depending on its altitude, a satellite orbiting earth travels from 1.9 to 4.8 miles per second. My 30-minute childhood trip would have taken 9 seconds.

At takeoff: Growing up, shoes were needed 9 months out of the year and were replaced only when feet grew. We ran barefooted when school was out, so washing feet each night at bedtime was routine.

Glide path: Now I can view thousands of pairs of shoes online, their styles and prices, order the shoes, and have them delivered to my house in days. And, if they are not to my liking, back they go. I feel underprivileged because there are seven days in the week, and I only have six pairs of shoes.

At takeoff: I envied my cousins. Their dad was an oil field worker and had a regular paycheck. They took a vacation to an exotic spot that sounded magic: Galveston, Texas. They trekked to the Gulf and played in the waves. The only vacation I ever got was three months at home in the hot summer.

Glide path: I am among the privileged. I have landed at Gatwick Airport in London, England, and at the Inouye International Airport on Oahu, Hawaii, as well as airports from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City, Denver, Dallas-Ft. Worth, Oklahoma City, Miami, and Washington, D. C. I traveled coach and preferred an aisle seat. We arrived safely each time and never needed oxygen masks.

At takeoff: and **Glide path:** For breakfast we were lucky to have oatmeal or an egg, and occasionally, cold biscuits with sugar on top soaked in yesterday's coffee. Our town had no drive-ins but did have one walk-up for fast food: Hamburger Inn. The intoxicating aroma of onions and hamburger patties sizzling on a grill wafted out the window and down the sidewalk.

Glide path: Today at the touch of a dial, I can have a variety of food: from America, Mexico, Italy, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, India, China, or Japan delivered to my door.

At takeoff: Behind his back we called our English teacher Dead Eye because one of Mr. Crockett's eyes was not like the other. One day he told the class, "People who use slang (he said *slang* instead of *dirty words*) show they have a dearth of knowledge of the English language, else they would use a variety of words, not just one that starts with an F." I did not use slang. That meant I was above the hoi polloi. It was snob appeal. I took the bait and mentally gave myself a pat on the back.

Glide path: The leader of my writing critique group calls me a wordsmith. I don't know if I merit the title, but I have come to enjoy the sounds of all words. There are no dirty words— dirty minds perhaps, but no dirty words. However, I confess that a standup comic who repeats one word endlessly loses me, no matter what word. It's not dirty; it's boring. My personal standard for communication, including humor, is higher than that. I refuse to give ear to that rhetoric. Maybe I'm still a snob.

At takeoff: We bought essentials. We did not spend money for trivialities like books. My only access to a dictionary was in our school library. It was a great book laid open on a wooden stand. When Mrs. Arnold asked us to bring an interesting word to my junior English class, I envied the boy who had a dictionary that included *effervescence*, the fizzing sound made when champagne is poured into a glass. Years later, my daughter and her husband gave me a

monstrous two volume edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the linguist's Bible. Its longest entry—for "run,"—runs on for 65 pages.

Glide path: Now, on my phone in my left palm, I have access to the entire OED with one simple vocal request. My computer program underlines a misspelled word, and my AI pointed out the letter *s* was missing. Not efferevence, but effervescence.

At takeoff: My four older brothers were out of the picture by the time I was fully conscious, so family consisted of my parents, an older sister, a baby brother, and me. I played cowboy with my Lindsey cousins on their five-acre farm at the edge of town, but my aunt and uncle never came to our house. A deeply religious, single aunt living across town had beautiful daughters and handsome sons, but I only knew one daughter because they were all older.

My uncle dropped by occasionally and played chords on our upright Gulbransen player-piano while he sang for us. His children were my double cousins, but I never met them till I was older.

My dad's sister married Eddy. They visited twice during my childhood. He was an inventor. They were rich and lived in Kansas. Their cars were big, and they brought orange slice candies which I loved. They showed slides of wildflowers they enjoyed in Utah and Montana.

That was my family: Father, Mother, sister and brother, three uncles, three aunts, three cousins—14 people including me.

The Glide path: Retired with time on my hands, I graphed a family tree. It reached back to my four grandparents, all born in the 1800s. I heard from some cousins and collected data. My efforts culminated in a book of 626 letter-sized pages. It contains personal notes, as well as data on births, marriages, deaths, children, census records, more than 800 family photos, and a 21-page index—three columns to a page. One of my lines extends to 1191 in Switzerland, and I can't even yodel. I named my family book: *Rootstock*.

If you enter a room and see two people facing each other, one talking animatedly and the other staring glassy eyed into space, the subject is probably genealogy. My genealogy is interesting to me; yours is interesting to you; and never the twain shall meet.

At takeoff: My earliest writing success was a mystery. Mrs. Madden left us free to choose a topic, and I chose to describe a funeral—told from the viewpoint of the corpse. I tried to communicate the serious tone of death, the eulogy, the mourners, and all accompanying details, right up to the final moments when the corpse counted the shovelfuls of dirt dropping on the coffin lid until the sound faded out.

When Mrs. Madden returned our papers, mine was marked B+. She asked all who made A to read their pieces to the class. That was fine with me; it let me off the hook. But when the A papers had all been read, she said, "I'd like Wayland to read his paper as well."

Had I done something wrong? Was she trying to embarrass me? I stood by my desk and began in a solemn voice. After only a few sentences someone giggled. Had they no respect? Had they never been to a funeral, never lost a loved one? As I read on, others giggled. By the end, the class was roaring like I was a stand-up comic. I didn't know what had hit me, and to this day, I have no idea why they were laughing, but my writing was suddenly a comic success.

The Glide path: For most of my career, writing was utilitarian, giving attention to content with little attention to style—letters to the editor, op-ed pieces for the local newspaper, and such. I had satisfied my curiosity about genealogy and was casting around for a new venture. Then a religious experience changed me so radically, I decided to try to capture it on paper.

I described my faith journey and years as a conservative Baptist followed by a period of intense questioning and research, then out came a book, *When God Disappeared*. It ended up on Amazon, and I sold many copies to friends and family members.

At takeoff: My six-foot, two-inch brother with the dark, wavy hair, was shot and killed by a Nazi soldier in Germany in 1945 days after he turned 23. The man who ordered the Nazi soldier to kill the American soldier wore a neat uniform with a swastika armband and sat safely in his office in Berlin. The officer who ordered my brother to kill the Nazi lad was in his office in Washington D. C. Generals don't fight wars or die in war. If they did, who would sign the surrender papers?

Glide path: The helicopter pilot shot down over the ocean stayed afloat until a boat arrived to rescue him and return him to service. The rescue boat was driven by a machine. There was no human involved. Will the day come when we only send drones to war? Perhaps we will no longer need soldiers, only technicians sitting at keyboards. May the better drone win. Why not?

Glide, baby, glide. As the plane circles the airport, my heart still beats more than 100,000 times each day. At age 95, it has beaten up to 4 billion times. However, the fuel gauge is invisible, so the time I have left is a mystery—as it should be.

As I wait my turn, I have two routines. One is passing out tips. My tip jar has 350 slips of paper, each with a positive note. Some are serious: *Love yourself; To make a friend, be one; Memorize a poem.* Some are funny: *You are what you eat; Love is blind—deaf, dumb, and crazy; To get rich, win the lottery or marry someone who has.* I pass the tips out every place I go: hospitals, doctors' offices; grocery stores, restaurants, retail stores, etc.

A second routine is to end every phone call, especially Spam calls, with a three-part sales pitch. First a joke: since I am 95, I know the secret of old age. The secret is: Don't die. (Giggle, laugh out loud) Next, I say I have a website where they can read my stories and poetry and view my watercolors. Third, I direct them to my four books on Amazon and share that each sale nets

me a few dollars on which I plan to retire. My retirement goal is 2050, but I will not be surprised if my plane sets down before that. I'm prepared to unbuckle my seatbelt at a moment's notice.