

NARRATIVE AND THE ART OF AIRCRAFT PILOTAGE

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With apologies to Robert Pirsig (1974)

While hosting Michael White's 1999 Plymouth (UK) workshop with Amanda Redstone I had the chance to get to know Michael White (MW) a little and to appreciate how flying was a passion we shared. In November 2000, Amanda and I attended the Weeks 1 and 2 Intensive trainings he runs at The Dulwich Centre, Adelaide, Australia. These course notes are selective and edited and do not accurately reflect the range, depth, or order in which material was covered.

STRUCTURES AND STRUCTURALISM

I took my seat with care. There were considerations like moving the carefully crossed seat belts, picking up the cushion and the blanket in its plastic bag. Checking the view through the window I saw the expanse of port wing and the two silent Rolls Royce RB211 turbojets. The wing and fuselage were covered with 2 mm. of aircraft-grade aluminium and concealed runs of fuel piping, heat-resistant electric wiring, hydraulics, and fuel tanks. Each layer of the plane protected and supported other layers. In the underslung wing pods were the four closely cowled jet turbines, each using 2.5 tons of fuel an hour. Structures, layers, and essences. Functions, properties, and qualities. This airplane was ;i structure of core elements, layered systems, and surface covering.

I took my seat with care. There was something auspicious about the beginning of a course I had come 12,000 miles at my own expense to attend. After introductions we began with structuralist and nonstructuralist thought. Structuralism comes from reductive science and physical understandings of the world. It proposes that we have layers to our "selves," the deepest layers (our "coir

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self") requiring expert interpretation to understand, while partially hidden layers (drives, motives, needs, etc.) are available for less trained people to comment on. Surface layers ("superficial acts," "surface tendencies") are seen as manifestations of deeper processes rather than having purposes of their own. It is a profoundly unsystemic theory as it takes things out of a relational context. This theory is everywhere, from humanism with its ideas of "becoming more truly who we are," to the notion affixed inner qualities like "strength," "determination," "vulnerability," "fragility," etc. The popularity of this assertion is such that its presence is not even noticed in conversation. Little wonder that humanistic, analytic, and naturalistic therapies have arisen to help us "meet our innermost needs," "fulfill our potential," and "discover our true selves." Little wonder many of our clients have constructed their needs as unmet, their lives as unfulfilled, their "selves" as damaged.

We hear about the importance of distinctions between nonstructuralism, constructivism, social constructionism, and postmodernism. These different traditions of thought have different histories and make quite different proposals for thought and for action. To lump them together or to confuse them is to miss the breadth of possibilities that flows from each. MW doesn't claim to be a postmodernist but seemed to speak passionately about it. (Or is the passion mine?) Modernism is linked to the existence of unquestioned truths and subsequent lack of accountability for one's actions deriving from these unexamined assertions. Modernism can be an attempt to escape values and value dilemmas. Postmodernism accepts no overarching truths, nothing as being beyond question and no one having privileged access to reality. Postmodernist thinkers sometimes get accused of being "relativists"—that is, if everything is relative then nothing is better than anything else. I ask if such a misunderstanding is mischievous but MW is more generous—he thinks it's just misunderstanding.

DOES MORE KNOWLEDGE MAKE YOU LESS KNOWING?

Night comes and we fly right through it. Going east at 580 m.p.h., night only lasts a few hours. Then it's daylight and I look out to see India five miles below and the Himalayas a hundred miles in the distance. Soon we stop at Singapore and after two hours in the airport it's night again and we're off again. My previous requests to visit the cockpit were forgotten by the stewardess so I ask the new crew. This time I'm in luck. I follow the steward through Economy, then Business Class, and then upstairs into First Class and forward into the dark hub of the cockpit.

"How're ya goin'?" the Qantas captain asks affably. I ask about the instruments and he fires up all manner of indicators and readouts, explaining each one as it is displayed on the TV-like screens that pass for modern cockpit instrumentation. As a pilot of a small and odd-looking homebuilt two-seat aircraft I am impressed. I'm impressed by the knowledge needed to fly this airplane and the modest manner that accompanies such knowledge.

Afternoon comes and we talk right through it. There's a curious paradox, we hear, about how we need some distance from our bodies before we can inhabit them. We start this distancing as children by talking to ourselves out loud and giving ourselves advice. This speech that becomes internalized makes it possible to reflect on life, not be tied to the moment, become self-regulating,

even decide to change course on some matters. These conclusions were arrived at independently of Vygotsky's thought, but strong confirmation of them has been found in Vygotsky (1934/1986), and this has encouraged further explorations of what these conclusions mean to therapeutic practice.

In therapy with children it's good to value this "self-talk" and self-reflection that allows them to take a position on things—a position that might barely be visible in their actions. Once you have the child's stated position on the problem many questions are possible. You can ask, "Why is it that you take this point of view? Does it say something about your hopes, your ambitions, the things you stand for, what?" You can ask, "Who wouldn't be surprised to know this about you?" or "What effect might it have on the problem if you stayed close to this position more of the time?" In this way the roots of another story are made visible. We're not creating these roots—they were always there—but through the scaffolding of our conversation we're encouraging the child to reveal purposes that structuralist conversations would not reveal.

During this conversation we're not discussing "how to manage children" but "how to consult children about their actions." This places us differently in relation to the child, in relation to the actions and in relation to possibilities for change. The child has more agency, is assumed to be purposeful, and is invited to reflect on his/her actions.

SKILLS DON'T JUST HAPPEN—THEY HAVE TO BE PRACTICED AND CRAFTED

Maintaining skills requires practice or "currency" and I've agreed to rent a 'Jabiru SK'—a small native Australian aircraft—on a free afternoon, from Murray Bridge Airfield, east of Adelaide. The original idea was aerial sightseeing but I want to master circuit flying in a strange craft so I practice takeoffs, circuits, and landings until I sweat. It's a slippery, slidey beast, this Jabiru, and a de-skilling experience as I struggle to control it. It takes 100% concentration on speeds, heights, circuit procedures, and control inputs and still I get it wrong, landing at all kinds of angles to the airstrip. Finally Neil, my ex-pat instructor says, "There, you did it all by yourself that time" Phew! Now we can go off sightseeing!

Maintaining skills requires practice and we practice our interviewing skills in pairs around a chosen question. I check some of my notes for ideas:

1. First, try and elicit a nonstructuralist problem description.
2. Then inquire about the ways this has affected their lives. This defines the problem as separate to them and begins an externalizing conversation.
3. Next, ask them to evaluate the different effects—are they positive or negative?
4. And try and elicit their judgment on why they consider each effect positive or negative. With this, they place themselves in relation to the problem. For example, "Getting poor marks in school is a bad thing because I want to be a solicitor," as one boy told me to the astonishment of his mother. (These first four questions comprise MW's "Statement of Position Map"

or "Four Categories Of Inquiry" where he encourages people to commit themselves to a position in relation to a problem.)

5. Tracing back the history of people's solution practices can deepen roots of a preferred story.
6. Connecting this story of solution practices to their views of themselves encourages different identity conclusions.
7. But remember that alternative stories must always be their preferred stories—otherwise, by highlighting them, we're doing little more than "pointing out positives." Our enthusiasm for new stories or identity conclusions has to join with theirs.

Hmm, if I can remember all this and follow the feedback in my interviewing I'll be doing better than OK.

In the larger group, again, more skills and practices emerge from other pairs. One pair gets stuck tracing the history of a skill. But "there are always precursors to precursors" says MW. I write this down.

Another pair gets stuck when "love" is discussed as a "thing." MW suggests we consider the issue of love—or affection, jealousy, thoughtfulness, etc.—as a practice not an essence. This renders love nonstructuralist and available—as "loving practices"—to all. I write this down too.

A third pair has difficulty when questions repeatedly meet with "don't know." It's better not to leave questions there, MW suggests, as the person has experienced a "failure to know."

Two more members of the group have trouble with medicalizing language and concepts. This is likely to invoke structuralist notions and make it harder to help people take action in relation to their own lives. MW takes pains to explain he's not anti-medication and knows that drugs sometimes open spaces for people to have conversations they could not otherwise have had. I reckon he must have felt misunderstood on this point in the past.

KEEPING ON KEEPING ON HELPS

Sometimes, with flying, you have to navigate small obstacles. Persistence in the face of the unexpected can pay off. MW is a keen private pilot and he and Cheryl White are flying Amanda and I off for Sunday lunch to a cliff-top restaurant on Kangaroo Island off the South Australian coast. He's rented a six-seater Piper Lance from a local flying club—a serious airplane from my point of view! A couple of their friends are also aboard. And I get to sit up front! MW says he needs me there as he's not sure how to fly it! So I suggest that one of us does the feet and the other does the hands. The air is rough and the cloudbase low—it's not a great day for flying but our banter adds jolliness to the mood inside the plane. After a bumpy flight down the coast and a short sea crossing we see the island and find the landing strip—a stretch of field in the middle of nowhere and it's full of sheep! MW does two low passes to scare them off but this has limited success. On the third approach he attempts to land. We're thrown this way and that by the vicious crosswind—I'm certain we're too far off line to land but MW is confident. With full rudder and considerable sideslip he rescues a skewed approach and touches down smoothly alongside the sheep. This man can fly too!

Sometimes, with therapy, you have to navigate small obstacles. Persistence in the face of the unexpected can pay off:

1. *If a child prefers to shrug his or her shoulders than talk you might say, "Can I assume that shrugging your shoulders means I can proceed? If not, could you hold up your hand to me like this and I'll stop?"*
2. *If you're worried a client might harm him or herself you could say, "I'm so anxious about your safety that it stops me from having interesting conversations with you. Are there things you could say or do that would allay my anxiety so we can go forward with this conversation?"*
3. *If someone admits to aggressive actions you might say, "Would you like to get your life free from aggression or give your life more fully to it?"*
4. *If someone says the discussion with you is good you might say, "Why is this conversation good for you? What is good about it?"*
5. *If a person makes a racist/sexist, etc. comment you might say, "What do you think the effects of these words are on people? Does this fit with your intentions? Does this fit with your intentions of how things might work out between us? What attitudes are linked to these ways of speaking? Have you been exposed to these attitudes before?" An alternative response might be "These comments make it hard for me to be here for you in the way I would wish. We can either leave such comments out of our talk or bring them to the center of the discussion. Which would you prefer?"*

If a woman client says she's been accused of being "co-dependant" or "enmeshed" you might ask, "Is this a sign of nurturing and caring? What would it be like if women stepped back from nurturing and caring? Would this have a good or bad outcome? And what would it be like if this caring was reciprocated more?"

THE OBVIOUS, THE MISTAKABLE, AND THE NEARLY INVISIBLE

All pilots make mistakes. Training isn't everything but together with pre-flight checks and mid-flight checks it can prevent small mistakes from accumulating into real hazards. As we take off from the strip at Kangaroo Island, MW uses full left aileron to counteract the nasty crosswind. There's seems to be a lot of wind noise inside as we climb away but I assume I'm just not used to the noises in this light aircraft. Then we all seem to realize at once that the cabin door isn't properly closed. Several of us try to close it but the wind pressure at 140 knots prevents us getting the latch in the right position to lock. It's noisy but the other latch is locked and the airflow would stop it from opening wide so it's not dangerous. I recall aircraft accident reports I've read where a door has been left open and pilots have lost control when they've let go of the controls to try and close it. Aviate, navigate, and communicate—in that order—I was taught. MW ignores the door and aviates and we ignore the wind noise. After landing back at Adelaide we discuss the pressures on private pilots when there are passengers aboard and, in contrast, the stress-free flying that's to be had when flying solo. Of course you could attribute silly mistakes like omitting "cabin doors—fastened" from the flight checks to "lack of discipline" but I'm clear that they relate to the value that we give life, the weight of responsibility this gives us, the ways this stress affects our "performance" as pilots, and the subsequent small mistakes that can easily ensue.

All therapists make mistakes. When interviewing families with other thera-

pists, who I feel might be critical watching, performance anxiety, apprehension, "freezing," and other possible "failures" are symptoms I know well. Still, failures are worthy of examination, as they may point to important values or principles at work. Behind human apprehension often lie concerns about causing harm, about immodesty, and about our comfort with the supposed expertise some may expect of us. This is an apprehension of modesty, of care, and of consciousness of our own problems with living. "Failing" may, alternatively, point to protest. I remember failing most things at school but only now can I see my lack of work, lack of obedience, and lack of interest as a small act of resistance against a system I experienced as degrading, uncaring, irrelevant, and unacknowledging.

We hear of the wife of a man who was routinely demeaning and abusive to her. Doctors had labeled her as "scatty and dizzy." With this diagnosis she successfully crashed her husband's car without retribution. What a skill of resistance!

Ideas about the "absent but implicit" invite us to consider the out-of-focus background against which statements are made. For someone to describe their lives as hopeless, for example, they must also have an appreciation of hope in order to discern the difference. What are the stories of hope in their lives? How did they get separated from hope? How have they retrieved hope before? How have they kept enough of a grip on hope to get here today? The more that their knowledges and skills of hopefulness are richly described the more available they will become to them.

When someone speaks of depression this also reveals knowledge of happiness; when someone speaks of rage they also know about calmness; when someone speaks of violence they are also showing they can recognize peace.

I am elated with these discoveries. "I don't think I'll ever get stuck again!" I rashly declare. The rest of the group laughs at my naivety!

SOME MORE WAYS FORWARD WHEN ALL SEEMS BLEAK

Amanda is fed up with a fear of flying spoiling her fun and holding her back. Cheryl tells her that Michael's fear of flying led him to address it by taking a lesson "and look how it worked for him!" Michael promises her a certificate from The Dulwich Centre if she goes! She books a lesson with Max, Michael's recommended instructor, and asks me about how the controls work. For the next couple of days, as we drive around in our Budget rent-a wreck you can see her in the front passenger seat taking corners using the ailerons, elevators, and rudders!

Amanda returned from the flight with a big grin. I think it was more a grin of fun than relief—or perhaps it was in anticipation of the certificate! "She did most of the landing herself" said Max. She was walking on air.

People get fed up with problems spoiling their fun and holding them back. *Externalizing conversations that linguistically separate the person and the problem make it easier to act against problems—after all, if you think you are the problem you can only act against yourself. As we roll problems back, we extend what we know. Following Vygotsky (1934/1986) MW talks about The Proximal Zone of Learning, the zone between what's well-known and what's possible-to-know. The possible-to-know includes resistances that have previously masqueraded as failures, the absent that has thus far only been implicit, unique outcomes that have been passed over—they all suggest different ways of joining the dots*

on the dot diagram and ending up with a quite different picture.

Taking people beyond what they know requires structuring of the work. You cannot leave things too much to chance or to "human nature." Scaffolding conversations—those conversations that build platforms for others to step into different territory, into what is "possible-to-know"—require understanding and practice. For example, to sustain a new story it can help by:

1. *Summarizing your understanding of key points they have made about this story. This summarizing "rescues the told from the telling" by a retelling of the points with the person now in a listening position.*
2. *Thickening the social history of the actions proposed. "What's the history of your familiarity with this kind of action? What led up to this?" There are always precursors to precursors I remember.*
3. *Discuss particularities of the performance of new meanings. "What time of day will it be when you do this? What will you be wearing? What will you say while you do this?"*
4. *Tie in other people's lives to these performances. "Who will be there when you do this? How will you find out what they witnessed you doing? Who might they tell about this?"*
5. *Predict and preempt responses. "What obstacles might you need to anticipate? These people who are sceptical about the steps you're taking—how will you bring them up to speed so they don't treat you as still being in the old story?"*

MIRRORS AND OTHER REFLECTING DEVICES

Leaning back in my seat I reflect on what I've just heard. The flight will take about an hour and a quarter I'm told, and we'll route over the center of Auckland for sightseeing and then north over The Bay of Islands to Kaitia. I've come to New Zealand for a few days to see my cousin who lives in Kaitia. Her husband, another private pilot, has borrowed a Piper Archer to fetch me from Auckland Airport. As we cross an area of sea on the way I ponder our chances if we get an engine failure. It's too far to glide to land and I haven't seen any life jackets. "You don't worry about engine failure, then?" I inquire. "Nah," he replies "I fly here all the time" as if that makes engine failure less likely. Maybe it's my sensitivity—having experienced four engine failures in flight I'm less trusting of the infernal combustion engine now. I'm not due a fifth yet though and the engine purrs away without a problem.

Leaning back in my seat I reflect on what I've just heard about reflecting teams. *The narrative "take" on reflecting team practice is quite unlike the Tom Anderson-style (1987) reflections that I had become more used to. With a narrative approach we don't just reflect, but also situate our reflections in our experience. The aim is not "sharing" (which would center us in the conversation) but embodiment. Embodying our comments in our experiences and our lives prevents the reflections from being taken as "academic" or advising the kinds of action that results from confusion between our life and theirs. The narrative approach to reflecting teams also reduces the gap between:*

1. Those who are expected to reveal their lives (clients) and those who are not (therapists).

2. Those who generally have fewer choices in their lives (clients) and those who generally have more (therapists).
3. Those who attend with relatively low status (clients) and those who come with relatively high status (therapists).

So the plan in the reflecting team is first to talk about what captured our attention, then say how and why it caught our interest, and then to comment on how this might have us thinking or acting differently ourselves. There's an acknowledgment that influence travels both ways—not just from us to them. Suggestions and interpretations are not required and at all times the clients should be at the center of the discussion. No longer can we hide behind our book theories and interpretative habits. And, after commenting, we're liable to be questioned by other team members, for example, "Where did that idea come from, Mark? A book? Personal experience? Other people you have met?" "Why did you think this caught your attention rather than something else?" "How has this affected the way you see these things?"

This way, the interviewed family can assess the relevance of our ideas to their situation. By contextualizing the acquisition of ideas, we demonstrate our appreciation that context gives meaning.

Now, I've tried to keep to this form of the reflecting team before but found it a hard habit to acquire so the seven times we practiced it constituted a bit of a good habit-forming practice for me. I have noticed that trained therapists often struggle with this much more than nontherapists.

MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THIS

It was an opportunity to remember. It was my last small plane flight and we were climbing out of Kaitia for an airborne sightseeing trip to 90-Mile Beach. He gave me the controls and we flew over the breakers for 50 miles before rounding the wild water at North Cape and then south again over the many inlets and natural harbors of the Northeast coast. The sun was low as we regretfully turned back to the airstrip. On the final approach to the runway all my memories of the trip crowded in, all those voices and people with and from whom I had learned joined me and as the wheels touched the runway we all breathed out sadly.

It was an opportunity for a re-membering conversation. This is a chance to grant certain people or voices significance in the part they have played in your life. It's an opportunity to recall those who have played a part in the development of a preferred story, those who could see things about you that have sustained significance and a chance to regrade their contributions.

And if I hadn't witnessed it unfolding unexpectedly right in front of me, I would never have believed its potential. What started with MW interviewing a woman who had been sexually abused and whose daughter had recently been raped became a most astonishing interview. I had read about re-membering conversations in MW's book *Narratives of Therapists' Lives* (1998) and here were these ideas and questions in action. An ordinary-looking interview changed dramatically when MW's questions elicited a half-forgotten memory of a couple who had cared for her occasionally as a girl. Together, she and MW discovered she had a history, one that connected her powerfully to these overlooked but vital figures from her early childhood. These figures treated her in ways that

were to be fantastically sustaining of her own life and the lives of others with whom she came in contact. And this was no "creation" of memory, no "insertion" of another's ideas into her life. It was the re-authoring of the story of her life that had her describing the experience through her tears as making her feel "normal for once" and "as if I have a history."

Apparent gaps in the history of people's important ways can indicate something overlooked. This might be the influence of a family member, friend, teacher, or even a book or mythical character. Rendering these influences a visible part of the storyline of one's life gives continuity and meaning to the way one lives it.

When a discussion that traces back aspects of a person's social history turns up unexpected people, further helpful questions might include: "What do you think they were able to see in you that others missed? What do you think the purposes might have been for that person who helped you?" This develops the person's contributions in terms of intentions and practices. Then questions like, "What might this have been like for them when you helped them reach their purposes?" and, "What do you think it meant to them to have you appreciate them?" develop a sense of their own contributions to these other people's lives.

Finally, questions like, "In which ways might you see aspects of your life as some kind of testimony to your experiences with them?" or "In which ways might their important influence now be extending from you and into other people's lives?" bring this thread of storyline up to date and acknowledge its path onward and outward.

Other useful questions might be:

"What's the link between this development in your past, the values that are part of it and what you offer to people now? Which other people might you be linked to in the values you have taken up here? How has your adoption of these values been acknowledged?"

ENGINE POWER, CENTRALIZED POWER AND THE JUDGMENT OF THE NORMS

I was beginning to understand how much power was required here. With 524 passengers and fuel for 14 hours this 400-ton airplane was not going to achieve a short takeoff. The last leg home is from Singapore Airport, which reaches out into the sea to provide a long enough runway for fat heavy jets like us to get off the ground. The captain had wound the flaps back and down so far that I knew we must be near maximum weight. Once on the runway he held it against the brakes while all four engines built up into a scream. Then we lurched gently forward, gathering speed painfully slowly, surely too slowly to reach the 190 m.p.h. we needed to get off the ground before we ran out of runway. We seemed to be ambling along, not accelerating hard at all. "Come on!" I encouraged the engines "Come on!" "Full throttle, more power, more power!" I urged, my face flat against the cabin window, my hands repeatedly wiping off the condensation from my breath. "Faster, faster, come on!" I screamed quietly, my heart pounding. "Come on, up baby up!" I was pouring every ounce of energy into willing the plane up now, I was part of the machine. "Yes, yes, faster, faster!" I screamed silently. With a strong final and prolonged urging from me the nose wheel slowly lifted and the weight was balanced on 16 main wheels. "Now! Now! Pull back! Pull back!" I yelled quietly. The captain must have heard because he did, finally, pull back the control column and we skimmed

over the harbor, gathering height over the many ships at anchor. It's good to feel part of a team.

I was beginning to understand how much power was at work here. I understood traditional concepts of power where it is located at a defined center (e.g., monarch, government) and expressed by various interests (e.g., police, social workers, doctors, politicians) and judged according to its legitimacy and whether it is used in people's best interests. This construction of power means that opposition is difficult—you can protest "trespass" against your rights, and you can join in acts of organized resistance but these efforts are frequently disheartening and can lead to despair—"Nothing can be done without changing the education system/revolution/overturning the government" is an expression of the futility of resistance that we have probably all felt at some time.

But there is a much more influential kind of power at work. A kind of power that is largely invisible and is enacted by all of us against each other and even ourselves. This kind of power organizes how we give meaning and how we judge most actions and thoughts that we encounter in our lives. This is the power of normalizing judgment, a power that has us fashioning our lives and identities according to the modern "disciplines." Disciplines like social work have us judging others and ourselves in matters like "quality time" with our children, or "appropriate independence." (These norms created "overinvolved mothers.") Disciplines like counseling have us judging others and ourselves in areas like "personal development," "authenticity," or "realizing our full potential." The rise of psychology has us ranking others and ourselves in tables of "normal" recovery from bereavement, "normal" adaptation to your child hitting adolescence, "normal behavior," "inappropriate responses," "good time management," etc. It's hard to face the smallest problem today without a sense of how it "should" be managed and how your own management of it might be judged to have been "less than."

This power recruits all of us into its operation and engages all of us in the construction of life and identity. It encourages us to regulate our own life and manage others. It is to be seen in the negative contributions it makes to those who come to consult us and their assessment of their worth. It's easy to spot in the deficit language of professional judgments, those descriptions of "enmeshment," of "personal inadequacy," of "immaturity," of "fragile/uncontained/incoherent identity," of "inability to change or move on," etc. It can also be seen in depression and the self-judgment of "underachievement," "personal failure," etc. It is everywhere.

However, there is a brighter side. If we are all fully implicated in its operations, then we also have endless opportunities to resist it. Each time a client says, "It's different talking to you—you don't judge me" signifies a refusal to reproduce it. Each time we celebrate everyday acts of living that contradict these norms we undermine its effects. Each refusal to work for "superior status," each indifference to achieving "adequacy," each resistance to inserting someone's life 'into this or that scale of performance, each relationship we enjoy that is outside the narrow legitimated forms—all these constitute continued refusals.

With this understanding I began to appreciate the wide-open possibilities for action.

For the 178' time in three weeks Amanda and I are discussing some ideas from the course. We're at 37,000 feet and look, here comes dinner! I scrunch up my legs even more and drop the seatback table from its plastic clip. The smiling British Airways stewardess passes me a carefully completed jigsaw puzzle.

zle on a tray that contains Chicken Provencale, Salade Nicoise, Lemon Merengue Slice, a bread roll, a small square of cheese and two biscuits, sealed packages of cutlery and seasoning, there's even a space for the small tub of French dressing. Ah, the joys of long-haul economy class!

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