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## Blog

### Landing at the Wrong Airport

Posted by admin on March 15, 2014



We've all landed at the wrong airport before. I sympathize with the pilots who bring a vessel in safely only to find they're in the wrong place. The notion of confirmation bias has gotten renewed attention after a recent erroneous landing, for which an [aviation article](#) suggests we "subconsciously seek information that affirms our beliefs and neglect information that might disprove the decisions we've already made."

Just last night I did it again, and I quickly tried to cover up my error.

### In Your Dreams



I had the good fortune to be invited to *In Your Dreams*, a PTO-sponsored family event at Meadows Edge Elementary School at which guests read books to circulating groups of kids at the school. I read [Night Wonders by Jane Ann Peddicord](#), in which a dreaming wayfarer stows away on the beam of a flashlight and travels from a seaside shore into deep space and back.

After the story, we dig our toes into an island beach and scoop up a handful of sand--two handfuls if a small child. In those hands you're holding about five thousand grains of sand. Toss it up into the sky...and let every grain of sand become a star. That's about how many stars we can see from earth with the naked eye. Yet there are more stars out there than grains of sand on all the beaches of the earth! A great addition to this [beachy scale model](#) considers volume of stars as well.

Back to the flashlight transporter...we're talking 186,000 miles *per second*. From earth we'd reach the moon in two seconds, the sun in eight minutes, and Jupiter in less than an hour. But to get to that first star Proxima, as in proximity--the first grain of sand beyond which are the rest of the world's beaches--would take over four years! At 186,000 miles *per second*.

### Twinkling Gaffe

On the night of *In Your Dreams*, I encouraged visitors to look up when they departed and find Jupiter high to the southeast. One clue, I suggested, is that (excluding near the horizon where you're looking through lots of atmosphere) the stars will twinkle, but the planets will not. Sure enough, as I exited with some families and looked into the partly cloudy sky, an obvious brilliant light captured our attention. "Jupiter," I asserted. It outshone everything but the moon.

As we stared, a parent said, "But it's twinkling." Sure enough, it was twinkling madly. That's the exact moment confirmation bias kicked into full gear. I knew Jupiter was high in the southeast and outshining everything; I knew this was not moving like a plane; I knew it should have been a steady light without wild gyrations. Still, I insisted (first to myself) the twinkling must be a product of the cloudy and turbulent skies, as wrong as that explanation seemed.

Then, as the intermittent clouds rolled through, a new object emerged higher up from the thing we were observing. Boom. Dazzling, high, southeast, fixed light. Now *that* is Jupiter. Everything I knew from observing the stars and planets brought comforting conviction that the new non-twinkling Jupiter was indeed Jupiter. No doubt. The misidentified twinkler had been the brightest star in the night sky--Sirius, in the constellation Canis Major, readily confirmed by following the three belt stars of Orion down and to the left.

I muttered away my error and simply spoke more loudly to the next wave of families exiting the school. Check out Jupiter, I said with authority. I had been decidedly wrong moments earlier. The error of my ways was safely corrected and no passengers were hurt, but I had certainly landed the plane in the wrong airport. I escaped with minimal egg on my face while wearing the equivalent of "scrambled eggs" on my captain's hat.

### Wrong Harbor



I confess I've done worse, what I deem professional blunders. One night a friend asked if I'd join him in motoring his snazzy boat across Lake Michigan to end the season. We set out with the compass light on and headed on the approximate course to a small harbor on the opposite shore. When shoreside lights started to appear, they were well off to the left and didn't match the symbols on the dated navigation chart we were using. We altered our course to the left, for it was clearly markings for a harbor entrance in the distance. They must have changed the lights, I imagined. Gone solar, perhaps, and switched to isophase pattern.

No. The lights were right. I was wrong. We pulled into the unfamiliar harbor and called out to someone who was out strolling after midnight. "What town is this?" Confirmation bias had struck again. Only later did I discover excessive wiring for the compass light had been wrapped around the compass itself, skewing the needle fantastically. When we approached the distant shore and saw harbor lights to the left, we steered for them instead of confirming our whereabouts. To the right would have been the intended landfall with its less prominent pierhead lights.

No one got hurt. Our approach had been cautious. But like those airline pilots in the headlines, I had brought the vessel into the wrong port. It's still the most embarrassing navigation error I've ever made, of which I've told no one in twenty years. I truly empathize with pilot error. Frankly, we've all done it in some measure.



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