

Falling through Air

Ever since I was a kid, I've wanted to go skydiving. I'm not even sure why, because I really do understand that the idea of jumping out of an airplane...while it's moving...at ten thousand feet above the ground...goes against every ounce of self-preservation that evolution has painstakingly stitched into us. I really do understand that. And it's an especially curious thing because I'm afraid of heights.

Yet there it stayed on my bucket list, year after year. I was far more worried that I would die *before* trying it than *while* trying it.

So when the opportunity to go skydiving cropped up while my partner Emily and I were on a backpacker tour in the Canadian Rockies, I had to do it.

Now, the first time you skydive, it's a tandem jump, which meant that I was strapped to the front of someone else who was very experienced and knew exactly what he was doing. He was in charge of checking the equipment and deploying the parachute, so I didn't have to worry about getting that stuff right. I did have to spend some time getting into the right outfit, which included an ill-fitting one-piece jumpsuit that went over my clothes, goggles, and a leather aviator cap that had me humming "Up in the air, junior birdman."

And of course, I also got trained on what to do to stay safe. For example, as you leave the airplane, you position yourself so you're flat on your stomach with your arms out, elbows bent, which helps you catch the air and come into equilibrium during freefall. We also went over what to expect when the chute opened and how to do the landing.

Throughout the training and...what I would call...costuming, Emily was very anxious—because if anything did go wrong, she'd be the one on the ground watching. I, on the other hand, was giddy. This thing I'd dreamt about for decades was finally happening.

Eventually, about a dozen of us loaded into this little Cessna prop plane. My jump partner and I got in last, because we were slated to be the first pair out. The motor was loud, and the space somewhat crowded, but the view was stunning: green and golden fields below us, tiny trees off in the distance, mountains and glimpses of ocean further still, and a sunny, bright blue sky crowning it all as the plane climbed up...and up...and up...and up.

I have to admit, when someone opened a small window and the wind came rushing in, I started wondering a little about the decisions I'd made that day. And then when the plane door slid all the way open, and I was **right there**, with nothing in front of me, I did have a moment of, "WHY did I think this was a good idea?"

But we were first, and it was time to go, and I didn't want to turn back. And so we leaned forward, past the edge of the door, and fell into the air. After the expected tumble, where I could briefly see the plane above me, we were in freefall.

[Breath]

...And it was incredible. I felt profoundly connected to everything—timeless and weightless and boundless—I felt as though I were a part of the air itself. Like a flat stone sinking slowly through placid water to the riverbed below.

The freefall only lasted maybe 15 seconds, but I'd never felt so at home in the world.

In order to create that experience of surrender to the air, I had to have profound trust in many things: the professional skydiver I went with, the equipment, the pilot, the physics of terminal velocity. I also had to put time into learning the skills to make it all work. But the gift on the other side of it was touching Mystery.

Many musicians have a similar experience. You plug away at scales because they're building blocks for everything else. You keep refining your technique. You practice the notes over and over so that they get into your muscle memory. You clarify details with the conductor or the other musicians to shape the piece in a way that feels most true to its essence. And then during the performance, you let all of that go and just surrender to the moment-by-moment unfolding of whatever emerges, trusting your instincts and everything you put into getting there.

Theologian Henry Nelson Wieman defines sin as any resistance to the creativity for which we're responsible.ⁱ Even if we're not trying to resist, or we're unaware of our resistance, we might be working against the good. He talks about evil as inertia, by which he means a lack of responsiveness to the world around you, as well as an unwillingness to be transformed.ⁱⁱ

So if I'm struggling against the conductor during a concert because I'm so bound by the way we did it in rehearsal, or if I'm falling through the air but refusing to acknowledge that feeling of interconnectedness, then I'm shutting out the holy. I'm not awake and responsive to the world.

A sense of control has its place for sure, but when we hold on to it **too** tightly, there's a cost. We're usually left with nothing in our grip except unnecessary suffering.

The disciplines of playing scales, or preparing to skydive, or engaging in a spiritual practice ultimately aren't about control. They're about weaving together a container of trust that can hold the risks we take, a container we can use in service of **letting go** of control, of surrendering to something larger than ourselves. These disciplines help Mystery start to live inside our bodies, the way a skeleton acts as a rigid scaffold for our tender flesh to hang upon.

Islam, which means surrender, builds this embodied connection to the divine into its very fabric. *Salat*, the prayers that happen five times a day and are one of the five pillars of Islam, are not simply words that you think silently to yourself. You also kneel, and stand, and bow, as you're able. Before you start, you perform *wudu*, the ritual cleansing of the hands, face, and feet. That orientation towards the holy gets into muscle memory.

We can't always know whether surrender will lead to the outcome we hope for. I mean, even though I'd learned how to land smoothly at the end of the tandem jump, I couldn't make it happen. I couldn't raise my feet high enough off the ground, and

we had quite the ungainly return to earth. If the tumble coming out of the airplane was expected, this one was not. Thankfully, nothing was bruised but my dignity, and even that didn't take much of a hit.

But that isn't to say that it's always easy to recover when our trust is shaken. If I'd broken a leg while landing instead of merely looking ridiculous, I probably wouldn't have been grinning quite so widely when I got back to Emily. I might have even lost touch with that experience during freefall. But if we're open to learning and practicing the skills that build trust up, we get stronger for the next time, in much the same way that falling down teaches a toddler something about what it takes to walk.

A basketball coach I once knew said, "Practice doesn't make perfect—practice makes permanent." Just as in sports or music, there's a cumulative effect in our spiritual disciplines as well. So what are we embedding into our lives? Are we digging channels that let creativity flow ever more easily, or are we becoming entrenched in fixed ways of being? Are we open to being lured by joy, or does busyness rule the day?

Even when surrender doesn't involve jumping out of an airplane, it can feel like we're putting our lives on the line—and I think that's because in a certain sense we are. In the day-to-day practice of releasing control in order to experience the joy or peace or courage that comes on the other side of it, we're also learning on a subtle level how to surrender to the inevitability of death. We're getting to touch Mystery.

During the embracing meditation every Sunday, this congregation recognizes that we're blessed by those who knowingly, and with curiosity and courage, face their final days. We're blessed by it in part because in observing that process, we also rehearse letting go. We also practice trust, and engage our willingness to be transformed, and surrender to something larger than ourselves.

If the analogy between dying and these living moments of surrender holds any truth at all, then it moves me to think that as I leave this plane of existence, I'll enter a space that feels timeless, and weightless, and boundless, as though I'm a part of the air itself. And that in that moment, I'll throw myself at the ground—and miss.

Blessed be.

ⁱ Wieman, *The Source of Human Good*, 126.

ⁱⁱ Wieman, *The Source of Human Good*, 105.