

# “The Human Trampoline”

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Seven years ago this week, I fell out of a plane. I didn't dive, I didn't jump, I really just fell. I was, as Paul Simon notes, "falling and flying and tumbling in turmoil" in every part of my life those days. Working on the road three weeks out of four, deep in the ending of a seven year relationship, living in a house that was stripped down to the studs. Being pulled in every direction, with no sense of where I was actually going. At that time, there was very little that seemed more sensible than climbing to 11,000 feet and falling out of a perfectly good airplane.

Now I, of course, have a paralyzing fear of heights. I've gotten vertigo on my grandparents' third floor balcony. So this was perceived by some close friends as a bad idea from the very beginning (and let me tell you, I didn't dare tell my mother). But a new friend was celebrating her graduation from a Master's program and wanted to do something a little bit crazy. I'd known her for all of a week, so when she asked if I wanted to come I didn't hesitate for a moment.

Early on a Saturday morning we drove out to the Gananoque Flyers clubhouse, wedged our bodies into bright red jumpsuits, and climbed into a tiny plane with no seats in the back. We slowly circled to 11,000 feet. Calmly pulling myself to the edge, I slid one foot onto the strut, the other onto the wheel, and I let go.

All of the turmoil, all of the tension, all of the pain of the last year rose suddenly to the surface, as I rolled head over heels over head over heels again, my eyes closed tight, clinging still to what I knew, even when it was mostly pain.

And then I heard a small whisper, right in my ear, "open". And so I did. And so much of the turmoil was suddenly gone, thrown off by that twisting, that turning and tossing, cast out by the bright sun shining on me and sparkling upon the river below.

Looking down I could see the whole of my world: the prison where I volunteered, the country route I ran training for a half-marathon, and the quarry where once I had gone swimming with friends from work. And at a glance I knew that my view encompassed the meandering roads my partner and I had driven as we finally called it quits after years of drifting further apart.

But this was a new perspective. Because none of those things looked like they had from the ground. This new scale made plain the constraints I had taken for granted, my world revealed as really very small. With the slightest turn of my head there was more beyond where I had been; a castle on the waterfront, forests I did not know, fields I had not yet walked, roads and rivers that would

lead me far from here. Despite the wind in my face and the roar in my ears, I was breathing deeply and freely and the quiet that my mind found I had been seeking a very long time.

The voice returned and said "fly". And so I did. My body, still clenched tight, needed this further word of release. I unfurled my wings, threw my arms above me and sped through the air like Superman, my greatest childhood yearning fulfilled. I cast my arms to the side and swooped left and banked right like the sparrows in the meadow below.

And then the voice said "swim". And so I did. I did the most graceful breaststroke of my life and I laughed aloud as I passed through thin clouds, swimming through the air as I fell to earth.

The voice, one last time, "come back" and I did. Grasping my harness, looping my fingers through the cords, my parachute opened and I floated, lighter than I'd felt in years. Ten minutes later, my feet touched the ground, a foot and a half from the red hula hoop target.

"There is a girl in New York City who calls herself the human trampoline. And sometimes when I'm falling and flying or tumbling in turmoil I say 'Oh, so this is what she means.' She means we're bouncing into Graceland."

Today is the first of September and so many of us are about to go falling and flying or tumbling in turmoil in the coming month. September brings with it so much new creation, and its unfortunate partner chaos. For me it is new clients, new courses at school, new students in my first classroom, and a new community.

Yes, the tumult is coming again, my friends; maybe you're already in it. Maybe you're moving to a new home; maybe you're welcoming a new baby into your family; maybe you've discovered a new love or are returning to school after years away; or maybe you're wondering how to go on after the end of a relationship or the loss of a partner or a parent or a child. Maybe news of war and violence in far off places is binding your heart and troubling your soul, wondering where hope and justice can be found amidst chemical weapons, air strikes and ground attacks. Maybe your turmoil actually began months ago but you haven't yet found your way out.

It has been my experience though, that when this turmoil ends, I am blessed with clarity I haven't found before. October 1st often brings a brand new world. Buddhist Nun Pema Chodron remarks in her treatise on the root of suffering that, "What keeps us unhappy and stuck in a limited view of reality is our tendency to seek pleasure and avoid groundlessness, to seek comfort and avoid discomfort. This is how we keep ourselves enclosed in a cocoon. Out there are all the

planets and all the galaxies and the vast, vast space, but we're stuck here in our cocoon. Moment after moment, we're deciding that we would rather stay in that cocoon than step out into that big space. Life in our cocoon is cozy and secure. We've gotten it all together." Chodron then calls us to leap into that turmoil, to move into the unknown, to blossom forth from that cocoon. But she'll also tell you that if you're seeking Bodhichitta, that last enlightened state, that you'll want a guide on the road.

That voice in my ear compelling me to open, to fly and to come back wasn't an auditory hallucination or divine vision. At least what we commonly think of as a divine vision. It was in fact a giant bear of a French-Canadian man; His name, of course, was Fuzzy. Indeed, as I tumbled from that plane, I was strapped to a strapping ex-military man. Fuzzy had put in his twenty years of service and moved along to his one true love: falling from the sky, over and over, every day. Helping others to let go too.

If you're a first time skydiver, they don't let you do it alone. You have to do a tandem dive ten times before they'll let you try it solo. Now, I'm not sure if you've ever seen what tandem skydiving looks like, but it's safe to say it's one of the more undignified predicaments an adult can find themselves in. Hinged together at shoulders and hips, ratcheting straps pulling us tighter and tighter together, the best parallel I can offer is a baby in a carrier. Fuzzy stood close to a foot taller than me, so once we were together, I had to stretch my toes to even touch the ground. With my battered leather aviator helmet, the huge goggles on my face and suspended haphazardly from a much larger man, I was thankful that my new friend was not a shutterbug.

Now, I wish there were more pictures of that day, more pictures of Fuzzy. I want to study them to see if there's something in his appearance that I missed. I want to search his face and see if it reveals somewhere in the creases the peace he holds, the comfort he offers, the joy that makes him laugh from deep in his gut. I want to find him again and pursue the wisdom that is intrinsic in one who has lived right into life's challenges and found love and compassion and a calling that fulfills his needs and others. I wonder still if I might have met my Bodhisattva, my teacher, my guide, falling through the air that day.

For I fell from that plane enormously calm, ready for what would come. While Fuzzy delighted in "popping my skydive cherry" as he put it, this jump would be the 3500th time he had trusted himself to his own careful preparation, to the laws of gravity, to the certainty he held that land was beneath him and he would return to it again. That the catharsis of the fall would end in the comfort of the soft loam beneath his feet. He said none of these things aloud of course, they were simply carried in his countenance.

"But I've got reason to believe  
We all will be received  
In Graceland"

We all will be received in Graceland. Okay, hands up if you knew Paul Simon was a Universalist.

We are all welcome in the land of grace, in a community of gratitude and faith, in a joined vision of a future filled with hope, beauty and depth. For us as Unitarian Universalists, coming into Graceland isn't about avoiding that experience of being untethered, it's about embracing it, about walking into that unknown mystery, embracing the turmoil, being tossed. As Rebecca Solnit says in her book "A Field Guide to Getting Lost" "We must leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go." Solnit invites us into that unknown future, into that distant horizon, beyond where we sit today. But we won't get there without work and more and more I know that we won't get there alone.

My leap was made possible because someone had gone before. Had paved the way. Had taken their strength and turned it into an affirming hand on the shoulder, an encouragement whispered in the ear, a willingness to fall through the air and hold me when the turmoil came.

There's a story I've heard many times; maybe you'll know it too. It goes something like this. A guy is walking down the street in the night and he falls into a deep hole and can see no way out. He calls out for help, and a doctor answers. He asks the doctor to help, so the doctor writes a prescription, throws it into the hole and carries on his way. Again the man calls out for help, and this time a minister answers. He asks the minister for help, so the minister writes a prayer on a piece of paper, tosses it into the hole and carries on his way. Once more the man calls out for help, and this time it's a friend who hears him. The friend immediately jumps down into the hole. "Joe?! What're you doing? Now we're both stuck down in this damned hole." Joe looks at the man and says "Yeah, but I've been down this hole before, and I know the way out."

As this time unfolds, as the turmoil and tumult grows, what holes do you know the way out of? Whose tremors can you steady, who can you hold gentle as Alexandra Franzen's egg, patiently allowing it to open on its own?

If it's you in the turmoil, how will you escape the tyranny of the expectation that you be able to do everything alone. It is not weakness to admit the need for help - indeed, asking for help, acknowledging our interdependence, is courageous in a time when the individual is ultimate. You may feel like you don't want to appear undignified, but sometimes you have to be willing to be embraced, to be strapped in, to trust that another's feet are solidly on the ground while your toes still seek it

out. How will you resist simply cracking the egg, and instead sit inside that darkness and be held until you are ready to emerge?

Sometimes we need to be shaken, to be tossed about, to careen wildly in darkness, before we are able to see anew. Sometimes we sit too long, eyes closed, hearts locked, in the same place. Sometimes we think that grace comes without effort, without courage, without faith; that it comes to us alone. If we are going to greet October 1st, that new day at the end of this challenging time, by cracking our shells, by opening our eyes, by flying through the sky, I think we're all going to need to get a little Fuzzy.

May we all find in the coming month and in the coming years, our own Fuzzy. May we all find the strength to know that we hold, each and every one of us, the capacity to be Fuzzy for another. The more we move into our struggles rather than away, the more we embrace the cacophony instead of shutting it out, the more we simply trust in the work of our hands and the hope in our hearts, the closer we will come.

But I've got reason to believe  
We all will be received  
In Graceland.

To whom will you give a reason to believe? And who will you receive?

Blessed be.