

Facing My Fears By Bruce A. Bennett

Last summer I celebrated my first half-century on this planet by jumping out of an airplane. Without a parachute. Fortunately the guy I was with had one.

Perhaps I should explain.

One of the young waiters at a restaurant my wife and I frequent recently took up a new hobby. Skydiving. One evening he was touting the benefits of hurtling toward earth at 120 mph before betting your life that a gaily-colored piece of cloth will slow your descent when I made the mistake of saying, "You know, I've always wanted to try that." Don't ask me what I was thinking; I obviously wasn't. "Great!" he said, "they're having an open jump day in late August. Want to go?"

My friend, who was sitting across the table from me, was no help whatsoever. "I'm in if you are," he said. My wife just sat there and smiled. I was trapped.

I've battled a fear of heights for most of my life. When I was younger I couldn't go near a window in any building taller than three stories. I've gotten better with time, but stepping out of a perfectly good airplane at 10,000 feet was...well...let's just say it was uncharted territory. As crazy as it sounds, my biggest fear was not getting a chute that wouldn't open; my biggest fear was getting up there and freezing. Mentally, not literally. The humiliation would've been a fate worse than death.

Normally jumping out of an airplane requires hours of instruction, but a company called Skydive Jersey Shore offers something new called tandem jumping. What you do is harness yourself to an experienced skydiver who wears the parachute and does all the work. In other words, you put your life in his hands. All you have to do is enjoy the ride...or pray for it to end, whichever the case may be.

The day of the jump dawned bright and sunny, removing any possible excuse for not going. The ride up in the tiny Cessna was cramped and uncomfortable, but I tried to be philosophical about it. If anything went wrong, at least the view on the way down would be spectacular. When we got to 10,000 feet, the instructor guided me into position, hooked our harnesses together, and double-checked the connections.

"Ready?" he asked. I took a deep breath. "Ready," I said. With that he flung open the door and I cautiously stepped out of the aircraft. The wind roared like a demon and clawed at me, making it hard to breathe. Below me the earth looked like one big abstract painting.



I should've been terrified, but I wasn't. In fact, what I felt was a strange sense of power and exhilaration.

I leaned forward until the laws of gravity kicked in and we tumbled out of the plane. In an instant we were freefalling, plummeting through the sky at 120 mph. The wind tugged at my face, making it hard to smile for the cameraman who had jumped with us. Below, the earth moved toward us in what seemed like slow motion, a crazy patchwork quilt that stretched from the skyline of Manhattan to the skyline of Philadelphia.

I'm not sure how long we toyed with gravity - 30 seconds, maybe 45 - before Mike, the instructor, pulled the ripcord. What surprised me about freefall was that there was none of that "stomach in your throat" sensation like you get from riding a roller coaster. All I felt was the adrenalin coursing through my veins.

When the chute opened everything suddenly went deathly still. That was probably the moment I'd feared most, hanging there, helplessly suspended thousands of feet above the earth. For someone who's afraid of heights, I figured it would be 3 or 4 minutes of sheer torture, but it wasn't. Much to my surprise it was the most peaceful, serene feeling I'd ever experienced. I could've happily hung there for hours.

Since then a lot of people have asked me if I would ever do it again. I might, should the opportunity ever present itself, but it's not something I have to do. There's a difference. Having faced my fear, I now enjoy a strange sense of satisfaction, an inner peace, if you will, that I suspect requires no encore.

On the other hand, it was quite a rush, so who knows? Perhaps when I turn 75. It might help me face one of my other big fears in life. Getting old.