

Featured Article

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SKYDIVING...& OF FEAR AND FUN

My passage from childhood to adolescence had one significant undercurrent—rebellion. Despite growing up in a not-so-conservative suburbia of Chennai (then Madras) I faced one obstacle to unfettered childhood: fear. Not my own, but my father's...indelibly scripted over any tendency I may have developed on my own.

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Ours was a dad-daughter relationship wrought with tension so thick one could cut it with a knife. Growing up in an all-boys neighborhood, ‘fear’ was non-existent in my dictionary. My dad found that out when I was five. Having searched the entire colony for a whole Sunday afternoon, he found me perched among the coolest and tallest confines of the backyard Neem tree, with three of my pals — all next-door boys. He ordered me down and marched me to his study, quietly fetching his wooden ruler. With three resounding thrashes that day, he inserted ‘fear’ into my dictionary.

Spending the next decade of my life in implicit obedience and strict conformity to parental “rules” intended at wresting every tomboyish trait from a girl “who will never otherwise find a good

husband,” I made up my mind to break the “fear” mold, slowly, yet surely.

At 15, I was the oldest in my school to learn to ride a bike. But I did -- over and above the din of dad’s voice reviling senseless Madras traffic--if only to fling myself out there amid the chaos of trucks, auto rickshaws, and water tankers, and ride the “fear” wave. It was my first triumph over fear since age five.

At 17, came the admission letter to BITS in faraway Pilani: “the land of endless desert sands, bitter winters and unbearable summer heat that causes nosebleeds,” according to what someone had told dad. My myriad arguments failed to pack the punch that would blow this fears away, instead, off I was packed to the cooler confines of a missionary institution...an engineering college nestled on the banks of the Siruvani river -- the lifeline of the city of Coimbatore. It wasn’t long before the rebel in me escaped the clutches of this academic ghetto -- which doubled up as a veritable nunnery -- by virtually threatening my dad into submission. He reluctantly accompanied me on the train journey toward my destination of choice -- Pilani -- to report for the winter semester admission to BITS in “frost-bitten January” (dad’s famous words). Triumph number two!

Dad and his fear ...there’s a story in our family that explains his whims: When dad was 22, he’d ridden a boat with friends from college, off the shores of Mahabalipuram--historical site of the Pallava temples. A sudden turbulence had sent him flying into the particularly rabid waters of the Bay of Bengal. “It was a miracle I even survived,” he often recounted. He never wanted me near a body of

water ever...or on a tree-top, or on a bicycle, or in a place where the heat made one’s nose bleed and the cold caused heels to crack...

But at 21, white water rafting seemed like a pretty cool idea to me (having learned to swim barely two years ago...). Of course, I never told dad until I got back in one piece -- surviving to talk at length about the experience of a lifetime. Triumph number three!

Conquering imposed fears was fast becoming a norm I was getting tired of. I didn’t want it to constitute a lifetime’s journey, despite being tremendously self-assuring at each instance. I believe each of us has inherent fears, which too must be dispelled during one’s lifetime. Mine was of heights. Not that I was paranoid about tall places but I often got the chills from imagining myself on an airplane and being required to suddenly bail out.

Having never been on a plane during the first couple decades of my existence, age 22 was a milestone of sorts. Not only did it mark my first flight journey, it also was my first ever attempt at bailing out of one!

Five or six or even seven paragraphs devoted to this perception-altering event may still fall short of fathoming the effect it had on my psyche -- liberating it from the shackles of its own making. But it’s definitely a worthwhile attempt, in my eyes, at underscoring the importance of overcoming one’s own fears and teaching oneself a lesson or two on living in the moment...

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As the airplane rose to 25,000 feet—a rusty, yellow Cessna, I looked around me. I was a novice rubbing shoulders with veteran skydivers who would enthrall me within minutes by their expertly choreographed mid-air calisthenics. I felt a knot in my stomach as my instructor patted my stiff shoulder, and sensing my rather uptight demeanor, said “You’re going to do just great,” with a flashing smile that suddenly became my lifeline. He was going to be right there with me, every step of the way, and I had to trust his over-a-decade’s experience jumping out of planes: a bizarre leap of faith, quite literally!

That early Sunday morning, there was just one other novice skydiver on the Cessna; he was sitting, fingers crossed and eyebrows knit, straight ahead—instructor in tow. We were each too absorbed in our own fears and elations to waste those precious minutes of ascent in small talk. But my instructor was bent upon playing the exorcist for his very own rib-tickling fancy: “I’m on LSD,” he hollered, splitting the steady drone of the Cessna with cackling laughter. I did an instant about face, a death-pale expression shrouding my face, masking the veneer of clarity I was trying hard to portray ...are we really going to jump to our deaths today, I wondered.

But the six expert sky-divers, seated ahead of us, booed him into silence. “It’s part of the rush,” they said. “You have no clue what it’s

like...just wait and see.” My mind was awash with hope and fear and everything else in between. The instructor, sensing my growing discomfort, said: “It’s time to roll now, and don’t worry, I haven’t had as much as my morning puffs of Marlboro today. We are going to soar, but not on the wings of LSD. So just relax!”



That was all I needed to hear; the rest of his instructions were lost in the Cessna’s drone and the sheer awe and excitement of watching those six veterans ahead of me tumble out in a matter of seconds, soaring toward a formation, the likes of which I’d only seen on RealTV. Then my eyes fell on the guy ahead of me, attached to his instructor: Siamese twins ready to be birthed from the Cessna’s comforting womb...Each of our tandem-jump instructors had been doing just this very thing for the past couple decades—taking novices like us down a wild dive from the skies: dispelling fears, broadening horizons and, literally, altering perspectives, changing, forever, the way we viewed the earth and the skies, and our places in the sun.

At the count of three, we spilled out of the mouth of the Cessna—from the warmth of her protective belly into the tantalizing arms of the roaring winds in a death-defying 250 miles per hour drop. I felt scared, vulnerable, like a prey clutched in the mighty eagle’s talons, about to

be torn apart; only in my case, being buckled to my instructor was a life-saver. I had evidently blocked out his instructions: lock your knees, draw ankles to your back, as close as you can, and tumble out in somersault-like motion....I only remembered the word ‘three’ severing the last shred of my Pollyannaish hope that somehow, I will not have to jump. I was flailing

my arms and legs, winds screaming in my ears in a ghastly mockery of every fear that was coursing through my spine. “This is it,” I thought, “There’s no turning

back” -- a final moment of revelation that stripped me of all fears and opened my eyes to the panoramic view: endless mounds of snow-white clouds...I was floating among them; mountain ranges, far below, curiously defining the margins of human territory beyond which wilderness assumed a life all its own...I was looming over them, high above, like a bird, who, for the first time, had learned to fly.

Amid this drama of exploding winds, the caressing clouds, and the colorful unfurling of the parachute across the blue skies, while I was trying to take in as much as my eyes could hold in those fleeting moments: the mountains, the rivulets and streams, the ground fast gaining upon us...a certain realization dawned upon me -- It was really about fun, not fear.

And as I floated above earth, I realized ah! life is beautiful.

Touchdown! †