

Final Project

**Choosing to Die, Choosing to Fly:**  
*An Process-Oriented Inner Journey*

By:

Arthur O. Shirk, Ed.D.

Study Committee:

Emetchi, MPW

Lesli Mones, MA

Stephen Schuitevoerder, Ph.D.

Final Project Supervisor: Stephen Schuitevoerder

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Conflict Facilitation and Organizational  
Change at the Process Work Institute, Portland, Oregon

December 1, 2012

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Type and Purpose of Project.....	3
Research Questions.....	4
Outcomes and Contribution to Process Work.....	5
Approach/Method.....	5
Ethical Considerations and Limitations.....	6
Contextual Essay.....	7
Comfort is Over-Rated: My Learning from the Flying Trapeze.....	7
Death.....	9
The Hunter, The Warrior, and Using 2 <sup>nd</sup> Attention.....	15
Summary.....	20
Appendix A: Blog Entries – <i>Comfort is Over-Rated</i> .....	21
Blog POST 1: Freedom.....	21
Blog Post 2: The Platform.....	25
Blog Post 3: Failure.....	27
Blog Post 4: Who Will Catch Me?.....	29
References.....	34

## Introduction

*The dreamingbody requires more than wellness; it wants challenge, risk, personal power, and freedom. Even more than this, the body must seek danger in order to become itself.... The body loves terror and darkness and gains personal power from these elements. (Mindell 1993, page 153)*

Seven years ago when I found myself on a cold steel table in the hospital's coronary care unit, I was confronted by the question: do I choose to live or do I choose to die? That was a literal, consensus reality, no-kidding physical confrontation. It shook me to my roots, and had me examine my level of commitment to living a vital and healthy life. In the years since that time I have stabilized my physical health and been proactive in creating an extraordinary personal and professional life that has been fulfilling beyond what I imagined possible.

In recent years, the same question has returned on both physical and existential levels. A growing and pervasive restlessness has emerged, along with the question – *do I truly want to live? Or, do I want to die?* On a personal level I have been confronted by the challenges of sustaining and deepening a marriage that is trusting, intimate, and loving. On a professional level, while my work in the field of human development has expanded beyond what I thought possible, a nagging sense of *is this all there is?* had left me disillusioned. A thread of despair and disillusionment began to pervade my consensus reality existence alongside a deepening desire for the “freedom” that I sense becomes available in another realm of consciousness, perhaps attainable through death.

And so, this project was about dying --- about choosing the death of old ways of being and living in the world, and birthing and nurturing the growth of a new ways of being

in the world. Although at the outset I had a sense of what I want to accomplish and defined a set of learning objectives... it was an unknown path into uncharted territory. The project has been both personal and professional – it is a personal quest that cannot help but inform who I am as a practitioner.

An underlying theme for me has been the pursuit of what I will call a state of freedom. This may refer to freedom at various levels – having the individual capacity of elder to honor the diverse parts of myself without entanglement or attachment; interpersonally possessing the fluidity to honor and value multiple perspectives and polarities in relationship with others, especially amidst conflict; and to act as elder within a system. Ultimately, the state of freedom I have sought to understand more deeply is a spiritual state of transcendent consciousness of both individuation and union.

### Type and Purpose of Project

This was an experiential project, and I was the object of study. The experiences studied were both internal and personal, and professional through practice with individuals and groups.

The purpose of this project was to learn from these experiences:

- Allowing myself to metaphorically die, or to experience the death of aspects of the life I have led and identity I have lived.
- Exploring a state of “freedom” or state of deeper awareness through meditation, nurturing ProcessMind awareness and deep innerwork, or through physical experience and movement.

- Deepening capacity of “hunting” and being “warrior” as described by Carlos Castaneda (1972) and Arnold Mindell (1993) – the exploration and full experience of secondary processes.
- Nurturing my internal sense of ally or allies, and of a “double” as described by Castaneda and Mindell.
- Experimenting with deeper use of second attention in my professional practice.

While learning and growth from this study has informed my professional practice as a facilitator of human development and consciousness, the growth and expansion of my own identity as I head into my next phase of life has been of greater importance.

#### Research Questions

The following questions underlie this study:

- What does it mean to allow oneself, or aspects of oneself, to die?
- What constitutes a state of “freedom?”
- What is my capacity as “hunter” and “warrior” and how do I use those capacities personally and professionally?
- Who are my internal allies and what does it mean to develop a double?
- How do process-oriented methods contribute to my capacity to employ second attention?

These questions are explored in the contextual essay of this document.

### Outcomes and Contribution to Process Work

The outcome of this study is a series of written articles published in the form of a Blog, titled “Comfort is Over-Rated.” The audience for the Blog included my professional community of consultants and coaches working in the human development field, students and clients of mine who are engaged in their own development, the Process Work community, and my personal social network. Each of the Blog articles are included in Appendix A of this document. To view the Blog Articles along with the embedded video media, they can be accessed on the internet at <http://comfortisover-rated.com/>.

### Approach/Method

The following table outlines the approaches I used for this project.

**Table 1: Methodology**

<b>What</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>How</b>
Innerwork	Ongoing Minimally will have a specific focus each month	Concepts from Mindell's <u>Shaman's Body</u> were be used as a structure to guide innerwork (hunter, warrior, death, ally, double). I will use exercises suggested by Mindell from works such as <u>Working on Yourself Alone</u> to follow and immerse into disturbances, flirts, stirrings, mysterious signals, and so forth. I used a personal journal to record experiences and learning from this process.
Meditation	Daily – minimally five times per week.	I sought to maintain a daily mindfulness meditation practice supported by readings from <u>The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology</u> by Jack Kornfield. I used a journal to record reflections from this process.
Professional Practice	Facilitation of at least four week-long leadership development retreats in April, May, July, and August	Facilitation of leadership development retreats of the “Co-Active Leadership Program” provided the opportunity to experiment with deeper use of second attention and dreaming processes in my facilitation. In conjunction with internship supervision, I used video to record my facilitation and reviewed those with a supervisor. Learning from these experiences were recorded in writing.
Physical Practice	Monthly: April through September	I used training in the Flying Trapeze as a way to access deeper insight into concepts such as dying, edge-crossing, flying, freedom, allies, and so forth. Learning from these experiences were recorded in writing.
Blog Writing	January, April, June, September 2012	Four Blog pieces were written in the form of a Blog on selected topics related to the project. Possible topics include: Dying, Freedom, Flying, Allies. (or others). The Blog will be published at <a href="http://comfortisover-rated.com/">http://comfortisover-rated.com/</a>

### Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Most of the study's focus was personal and centered on personal reflection. As such, no other people were impacted by the investigation. The emphasis was on insight gained

from my own personal experience, and did not focused on the efficacy of any particular method or approach to applying Process Work with others.

### Contextual Essay

At the start of this study, there was a mix of internal impulses rumbling and nudging me. I was unsure whether or how they would come together in a cohesive way, but I knew that I sought to:

1. Become more free of a chronic state of mild depression that I was experiencing.
2. Experience a greater degree of “freedom” in my life and create practices that would sustain that state. In addition, I wanted to better understand what a state of freedom means to me.
3. Learn to draw on a deeper reservoir of awareness in both my life and professional practice. I wanted to utilize a deeper domain of my consciousness in my life and work.

The following sections describe my journey and learning using the Flying Trapeze as a structure, which were chronicled in my Blog *Comfort is Over-Rated*. I then describe how central themes related to “choosing to die” and “choosing to fly” relate to selections of the literature of process-oriented psychology and shamanism.

#### *Comfort is Over-Rated: My Learning from the Flying Trapeze*

Between January and July 2012 I was a student at the Trapeze School of New York and completed about fourteen two-hour classes during which I learned the basic techniques of the Flying Trapeze along with a series of “advanced-beginner” flying tricks. One on level, the



Flying Trapeze was simply a fun and adventurous activity that fuels my love for exhilarating physical activity with an energizing dose of risk-taking. On another level, it served as a structure that framed my learning and awareness of my own process, my edge-crossing (or not), and my experience of constructs such as the Hunter and Warrior as described by Castaneda (1980) and Mindell (1993). At the deepest level, the Flying Trapeze represented for me an immersion into and exploration of the “state of flying” and freedom for which I long, and my relationship to that state.

As I began taking the Flying Trapeze classes, a structure began to emerge that made sense to me as a way to focus my attention and learning. At the outset, my focus was on the overall draw that the experience of flying had for me --- my inner quest for freedom and how that has been a recurring theme throughout my life. My initial Blog Post, “Freedom” focuses on that experience.

Subsequent Blog Posts follow the key elements inherent in the practice of the Flying Trapeze. This begins with the experience on the platform and process of actually grabbing hold of the trapeze bar and jumping into a swing. Standing on that platform, particularly as a very novice flyer is an intense experience because it is a leap into the unknown. Thus it serves well as a trigger for a whole host of internal experiences, sensations, thoughts, and feelings. I describe that experience and my learning in my second Blog Post titled “The Platform,” and that writing translates my experience from the trapeze to other “platforms” in my life when I am entering into something that feels frightening or challenging.

The most fundamental part of the Flying Trapeze is the “swing” itself – the way in which a Flyer uses his or her body to gain momentum in the swing, to gain rather than lose height. For that to happen, the Flyer must be present on multiple levels to what is happening – must feel the

rhythm of the swing, the experience of one's body in motion. A challenge for me as a novice flyer was to stay present and aware during that experience, much like a Shamanic Warrior being conscious of his or her journey into altered states at the same time he or she is on that journey. I also at that time was learning a great deal from failure and my relationship to failure in this process, which resulted in the title of the third Blog Post: "Failure."

Finally, every trapeze swing ends with some sort of release --- to reach toward a catcher and continue the swing, or to drop in one way or another into the net. I was struck by the impulses both to release toward something versus the tendency and inclination to cling to what seemed safe. This too struck me as very applicable to many situations in life when I experience a clinging to what is primary. My final Blog Post, "Who Will Catch Me?" describes my experience and learning about clinging and releasing.

The text of the Blog is included as an Appendix to this document, but lacks the video segments that are a part of it. The reader is invited to view the Blog Articles in their entirety at [www.comfortisover-rated.com](http://www.comfortisover-rated.com).

### *Death*

My relationship with Death and what it means to die shifted throughout the course of this study. I initially chose death as a part of this exploration because I was experiencing difficulty rebounding emotionally after the death of my older brother, John. His death followed not too long after the passing of my father and two beloved canine companions. During that time, I was aware that I seemed to be moving through life much of the time in a state of mild chronic depression. I was also aware at times of internal impulses regularly

pulling me in a direction of self-destruction. An observer part of me was watching this happen and wondered whether or not on some level I was trying to end my life.

As Levine (1982) describes, living in what seems like a fear of death may actually be an apprehension to live life fully. Along this journey, my relationship with death has transformed from holding him as a seductive enemy at arms length to knowing him as a close ally. I think of this in three main ways:

1. It is through the death of my constructed consensus-reality identities and history that I become free.
2. Paradoxically, the awareness that death may come at any moment creates full aliveness in the present.
3. The experience of freedom that I imagine may come through physical death is available in the present, physically alive state now through consciousness of sentient essence.

Death as an ally is a prevalent theme in Mindell's writing of process-oriented psychology primarily through shamanic traditions (1993; 2000). Drawing on the writings of Carlos Castaneda (1972; 1998) and others, Mindell refers to our fantasies of death and near death experiences as "...possibly the most powerful allies... they challenge you to expand your identity and to accept them as the magic carpet to renewal." (1993).

#### Death of Consensus-Reality Identity

The first way that I have come to know death as an ally is through the way in which he catalyzes a letting go of attachment and clinging to constructed identity in consensus reality. In his writing on the experience of dying, Levine (1982) describes the suffering that comes from our clinging to the identities that we have constructed in our lives. He

says that: “In death, we fear we will lose our ‘I,’ our ‘me-ness,’” and that “...the more we have invested in protecting something of ‘me,’ the more we have to lose and the less we open to a deeper perception of what dies, of what really exists.” (page 14). He describes this as a trade-off that is often made in life --- a trading off of our true identity for the identity or position or collection of roles we have played in life. He writes “We have traded grace for the mask of someone doing something in a world of arbitrary values.” (page 55).

In my personal exploration when I reflected on my emotional state of being depressed or angry or afraid it often seemed to be closely associated with my attachment to my identity as *someone* in life --- as husband, as student, as consultant, and family member – and all of the expectations or aspirations I connected to those roles. This identification pushes one into a victim-of-life stance in which one’s identity is molded by the external world. It is the life of the average person who “...never leaves the domain of consensus reality but dwells within the walls of the ordinary world.” (Mindell 1993, page 67). In his counsel to Carlos Castaneda, Don Juan explains: “...let’s say that I know all kinds of things because I don’t have a personal history, and because I don’t feel more important than anything else, and because my death is sitting with me right here.” (Castaneda 1972, page 37). As a process-worker, when we are aware of our identification with consensus reality roles and are able to drop below them to a more ProcessMind state, “... our rigid identity ‘dies’ and we move fluidly among identities.” (Mindell 2010, page 110)

For some, at the time of death this identification with identities formulated over a lifetime may fall away, opening to a awareness of a more true existential human experience (Levine 1982). Levine writes: “We break our identification with the seeming solidity of

separate bodies and separate minds. And we merge into the one heart that beats in us all.” (page 17). This is echoed by Mindel in The Shaman’s Body (1993): “If you give them a chance, fantasies of death will erase your personal history: the way in which you work, the expectations you have of yourself, and your predictable and worn-out patterns of relating to others” (page 50).

Several years ago I had the difficult blessing of being with my father during his final days as he approached death. My experience with him was much as Levine describes – the more superficial parts of my father seemed to slip away into irrelevance as an opening of deep awareness and spiritual clarity blossomed. I experienced this through his energetic presence as well as through his words that seemed to flow from a place of loving wisdom.

#### Death as Ally on my Shoulder

*Death is our eternal companion, don Juan said with a most serious air. “It is always to our left, at an arm’s length. It was watching you when you were watching the white falcon; it whispered in your ear and you felt its chill, as you felt it today. It has always been watching you. It always will until the day it taps you (Castaneda 1972, page 33).*

Facing the threat of literal physical death is an experience I have lived, as someone with serious coronary artery disease. At the time of my diagnosis seven years ago it came as an abrupt shock when I needed to have twelve stents implanted into my arteries to maintain sufficient blood flow and stay alive. Those procedures saved my life and brought me face to face with the real possibility of dying. What it sparked in my life at the time like a loud thunderclap was a ferocious desire and commitment to life fully. What I experienced was close to Don Juan’s advice to Castaneda: “This, whatever you’re doing now, may be your last act on earth. It may very well be your last battle. There is no power which could

guarantee that you are going to live one more minute.” (Castaneda 1972, page 82). For several years, my life took on an urgency that blasted through the walls of complacency. Fueled by a dose of fear but more importantly a fervent desire to live, my life took on the “...flair, the power, the compelling force of the acts performed by a man who knows that he is fighting his last battle on earth.” (ibid, page 84). As I reflect on that time, I see that Death was my clear ally because he moved me beyond fear to a full embrace of living. During that time I expanded my professional practice beyond the boundaries of the United States and began working throughout Latin America and Europe, I became fluent in Spanish, I allowed myself to follow my heart in relationships which led to getting married and creating a home, and in various other ways life shifted from black and white to color. As Levine writes (1982), “The more you open to life, the less death becomes the enemy. When you start using death as a means of focusing on life, then everything becomes just as it is, just this moment, an extraordinary opportunity to be really alive (page 30).

Over time, however, the immediacy of death diminished as my health became more stable. In the absence of physical pain and with the seeming security of coronary health, death’s role as an ally began to recede. In more recent years the death of my father and brother along with this exploration have reacquainted me with the valuable role that death plays as my ally.

### Death as Freedom

Early on in this journey I worked with members of my Study Committee to follow and unfold the signals that I experienced related to death and the process of dying. In one exercise, I allowed myself to imagine and experience as closely as possible what it would be like to physically die. In this inward journey, I experienced that I imagined the moment of

death like a portal opening to a state of complete peace.... of floating free with a simultaneous sense of infinite freedom and whole connectedness to all that is. My closest approximation to this ineffable state is that it is a state of grace and transcendent unity.

Although it now seems plainly obvious now, at the time it seemed extraordinary to notice that my imagined state of death was so similar to the state of being I experience as complete and transcendent freedom. Throughout my life I have yearned for and sought this state of freedom in various ways, both healthy and destructive. I had not made the connection, though, that the sought-after destination was the same regardless of the route or method of transportation I chose. In this study, two concurrent avenues of exploration were unfolding: on one hand, the exploration of using the Flying Trapeze as a physical means of entering into a state of freedom; on the other hand, an investigation of self-destructive tendencies to indulge in unhealthy food, sex, or alcohol. What became apparent was that underlying all of these is the same desire for freedom. In process work terms, it is my most fundamental experience of sentient essence.

The important implication for me today is the way in which I relate to this state of freedom. On one end of a spectrum would be the view of this state as a rare and illusive occurrence that happens in extreme moments -- such as through the Flying Trapeze or scuba diving or figure skating or deep meditation or, alternately, as an escape from consensus reality fabricated through food or sex or mind-altering substances. In either of these scenarios it is a state that is marginalized from my consensus-reality identity – it is outside of me and akin to an artificial state that is fabricated. On the other end of this spectrum is the experience that this state is the most real and authentic aspect of existence and identity --- that it represents the most true form of who I am as a spiritual as well as

embodied being, and is present and accessible in every moment of full presence. Mindell (2000) refers to the former scenario as a marginalization of sentient experience in which the “little you” experiences itself only as a human being and regardless of the ups and downs of life is headed toward what must be a tragic end in death.

I am uncertain where on this spectrum I have arrived, but am aware that movement has happened. I chose to use the Flying Trapeze as a central structure in my study because I recognized the importance that *flying* has always had in my life... of all experiences I have the ones that most capture my attention and fascination relate to the experience of flying. Drawing on mystical literature, Mindell refers to the “quality behind all things that flirt with you” as the *double*, “...the sentient essence, an invisible face behind all other faces, behind the most horrible and magnificent events, the wisdom in your dreams, addictions, and worst compulsions.” (2000, page 200). The *double* is the energy and dreaming that underlies the Big You. And so, a significant outcome of this exploration for me has been to come closer to an embrace of my spiritual nature as the most real and true aspect of who I am, have been, and always will be.

#### *The Hunter, The Warrior, and Using 2<sup>nd</sup> Attention*

An important objective of this process was to deepen my capacity to use second attention – to draw on a level of knowing beyond the techniques and skills of process work. I was fortunate to have two concurrent laboratories to explore how I stay attuned to my inner experience and the degree to which I allow myself to follow paths of insight that exist in a more dreamland and sentient level of experience. One arena was a 10-month process of facilitating a leadership development process for a group of people in Sitges Spain which



I also set up as an MACF internship project. The other laboratory was a 7 month period taking classes in the Flying Trapeze at the New York Trapeze School.

In both cases, I held the intention to be more aware of the subtle signals both internally (in the form of body sensations, images, impulses, and so forth) and externally such as subtle cues from others, flirts from the environment, and so forth. My intention was also to become more conscious of edges I encountered along the way and to expand my ability to cross them with greater awareness. Although he is not speaking in a process work context, Levine (1982) refers to edges as our resistance to life, “the place the heart closes in self-protection.” (page 34), and connects edge-crossing with the fear of death when he writes: “We see that our pain arises in pulling back from the unknown and the imagined. It is by playing this edge that we expand beyond the fear of death, beyond the idea of ‘someone’ dying, and come into the wholeness of being, the deathless.”

The initial exploration – in both the context of the Flying Trapeze as well as in facilitating the leadership development program was to discover and nurture my capacity as Hunter. As is the case of a hunter in the woods, the Shamanic Hunter opens his full capacity to sense the environment (both internal and external) as he moves along his path (Castaneda 1972; Mindell 1993). A different metaphor comes to mind which I often use in my leadership development programs – that of holding “multiple screens” of attention. It is like the security guard in the front lobby with multiple video screens in front of him that show different views, such as the outside parking lot, the stairwell, the conference room, and so forth. Although all of the screens are visible all of the time, the security guard might notice a subtle movement on one of them and expand his attention to it in a given moment. As Hunter, you “...know that you are simultaneously various parts of the

world and the facilitator of those parts. You are the doer and the one done to, the seer and the seen.” (Mindell 1993, page 63).

In my process of becoming better acquainted with my capacity as Shamanic Hunter I found that holding the metaskill of *curiosity* was essential. In particular being inquisitive about subtle signals that did not seem to fit or that were unexpected. It was, as Mindell (1993) describes, a practice of remembering and experiencing that “love for the absurd is a transformative metaskill that turns anything and anybody into gold.” (page 87). I experienced this both in the context of the trapeze and in work with individuals in a leadership development context. On various occasions upon noticing something odd, rather than casting it aside, I allowed myself to follow it and be curious about it. Often, doing so prompted a rich discovery for me or for the other.

Exploration of the Hunter also provided fodder in my quest to enhance my level of self-care, both physical and emotional. Castaneda (1982) writes of the care a Hunter takes to preserve his capacity to be aware and to become “inaccessible,” and writes:

...you touch the world around you sparingly. You don't eat five quail; you eat one. You don't damage the plants just to make a barbecue pit. You don't expose yourself to the power of the wind unless it is mandatory. You don't use and squeeze people until they have shriveled to nothing, especially the people you love... to be unavailable means that you deliberately avoid exhausting yourself and others. (page 69)

The distinction between Hunter and Warrior became apparent to me along the course of the project. It is one thing to notice subtle or not-so-subtle signals around or within me, and quite another to follow and surrender to them. My objective in this process was to, as Mindell says: “ ... develop the second attention, for this leads to living the dreamingbody and finding the path of heart.” (1993; page 27). The distinction is between

having something in my awareness and being able to name it or explain it (Hunter), and to enter into the experience of it with mind and body and heart and allow it to inform me (Warrior). “The hunter explains while the warrior dives in. The warrior experiences power. She allows power to explain itself by moving her to dance, cry, meditate, and yell...” (ibid, page 79). Another way that I make the distinction is that in the past it has been more familiar for me to conceptualize what an experience *should* be like, and then to create that experience. Rather than that, the new perspective I learned is that immersing myself and surrendering to the experience that wants to happen entails a stepping into the unknown and mysterious, and when that happens the experience itself is what informs and guides me --- I become the receiver of it and its wisdom rather than the initiator of it.

With both people and with the Flying Trapeze, a sort of surrender and trust is needed – a stance that from the journey and exploration will arise something useful. It is a stance of profound deep democracy, of withholding judgment of the value of what is being followed or of what may arise from it. In Castaneda’s words “To achieve the mood of a warrior is not a simple matter. It is a revolution. To regard the lion and the water rats and our fellow men as equals is a magnificent act of the warrior’s spirit. It takes power to do that.” (1982, page 121).

I learned along the way both from having the experience of following experiences as well as from not following them – that is to say that there were signals and edges that I repeatedly and regularly pushed away as irrelevant. Levine (1982) describes this experience well when he writes: “Very seldom, as were walking down the road, if something arises which threatens us, do we go straight into it. Instead we attempt to dodge

to the right or to the left, to elude the next moment, to escape. We wish to rush away to the safety of a false reality, a fractured being in which we somehow feel safe.” (page 12) .

A primary example of noticing my experience of marginalizing an edge signal relates to the theme of self-care. Repeatedly and regularly my academic advisor pointed to ways in which I may have been marginalizing “self-care” in my life, and regularly and repeatedly I responded with “*Yes, thank you... I will think about that*” and then promptly dismissed it as not relevant. However, a gnawing sensation that I was missing something continued to pop up in my awareness. The most dramatic instance of ignoring signals that clamored for greater self care happened following my second or third trapeze class. Toward the end of class I was not feeling well and was experiencing mild heart-related sensations that I sometimes experience under heavy stress related to coronary artery disease. It was intense enough that I excused myself from class, and during the entire drive home I was very aware that the symptoms were not abating. And yet, I pushed all of this aside by telling myself that I could push through it or could take some additional medication and could continue with the trapeze classes as long as I was careful not to push too hard. As this was happening, I was aware of a part of me observing myself pushing aside the very clear signals I was getting.

It was not until I did lasting damage to my shoulders that I confronted the secondary nature of self-care. The flying trapeze creates a great degree of stress on the shoulder joints, which is challenging for someone in their fifties, and as I progressed to more challenging trapeze tricks it created greater and greater shoulder pain for me. These symptoms, too, I pushed aside over a period of months, telling myself that as long as I did the right strengthening exercises I could push through it. Finally, when I listened to my

heart and body and hung up my trapeze tights for the last time, I noticed that I felt tremendous relief and freedom. While the price was a bit heavy, what I realized more deeply was that this was a part of my own growth in identity from someone who uses external and fabricated ways of creating an exhilarating sense of flying and freedom to someone who is able to open his awareness at any time to that dimension of awareness and freedom – and that it is the truest part of who I am.

### *Summary*

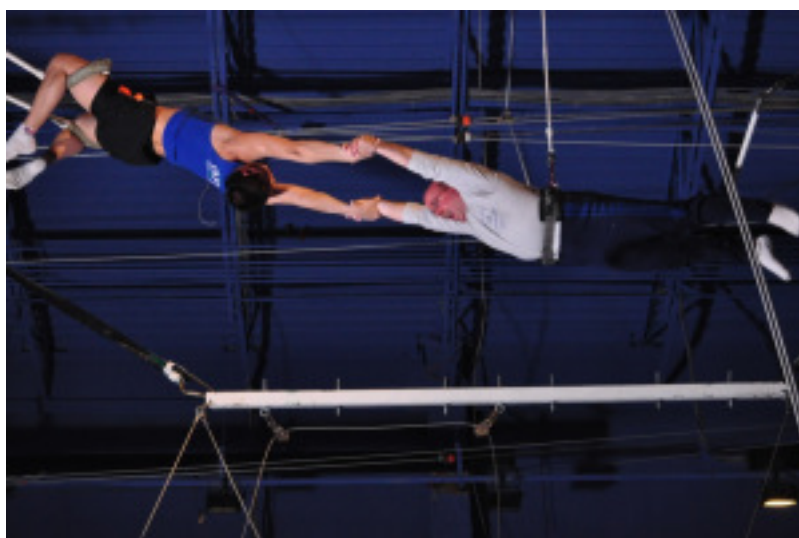
Today, a year after embarking on this exploration I notice that I am both more fully alive and paradoxically more ready to die – in the sense that I experience living in a more present way and with a profound sense of gratitude for that opportunity each day. Experiencing the Flying Trapeze was a bucket list item for me – and afforded me the chance to enjoy the exhilaration of the adventure as well as to integrate more fully the knowledge that freedom is accessible in a more direct and real way in every moment.

As both an evolving human being and a practitioner in human development, I believe that my core capacity to move more fluidly between dimensions of experience is significantly enhanced from this experience. The metaphor of the Flying Trapeze served me well as a way to embody and remember many lessons. Today, I often notice myself catching a signal or flirt and a momentary flash of lessons learned on the platform of the Trapeze. At the outset, elements of this study seemed disconnected and contradictory – but have merged together in a more coherent way that is meaningful for me. Perhaps most importantly is a deep personal recognition and embrace of my spiritual nature, and commitment to continue my growth in that area.

## Appendix A: Blog Entries – *Comfort is Over-Rated*

A series of four Blog Articles were written and published that chronicled my experience exploring the Flying Trapeze with the Trapeze School of New York. Each of these Blog Articles included embedded media in the form of images, sound, or video segments and can be viewed at [www.comfortisover-rated.com](http://www.comfortisover-rated.com).

### *Blog POST 1: Freedom*



My first catch on the Flying Trapeze... reaching for freedom

Today was a bucket list day. For many years I have harbored a not-so-hidden secret desire to fly on the high trapeze. Knowing it was not-so-hidden, my husband John gave me a gift certificate to the New York Trapeze school for Christmas... and gulp, the not-so-hidden desire was plucked right into the realm of reality. I knew that it was important to do this --- and to do it now. Not just because I have been intrigued to do it for a long time, and not just for the rush that I knew would come from it. Some other yearning has been gnawing away at me wanting, but not quite able, to come into clearer view... So, over the past few weeks I have been pondering what this flying thing is really all about.

Why now? Well, this has been a time of struggle for me, these last six months or so. It is hard to say it, so I want to lay it right on the table... I have been sad and isolated and feeling lost... grappling and battling with something illusive but deep inside. I am getting older, and frankly not liking it very much. I have lost my dear companions Revel and Puck. I have lost my father and very recently my brother. Life has seemed, well, hard. In times when I get stuck in an almost despair-like sense of struggle and futility, I grapple between taking good care of myself and not treating myself well. I notice that I am drawn to indulgences that are damaging to my heart and body and probably spirit, too. This is not good for anyone, and especially for someone with heart disease.

All the while, the wiser observer inside watches.... “do you see yourself doing that? Why is it that for someone who stands for life and realizing dreams and possibilities.... you are actually engaged in hurting yourself.... hmm.. why is that?” The observer is often present -- I notice that he doesn’t seem to intervene much... but rarely does he

allow me the pleasure of indulging myself unconsciously. That would be the downside of doing too much self-development.

Could it be that I don't want to live?

Now, that is a strong question to pose. It is an uncomfortable question to pose. It is not palatable or even acceptable to say such a thing -- especially if you are a "be all you can be" champion for human development.

It was confronting some months ago when I summoned more courage to ask myself this question more directly... do I want to live or do I want to die? The answer to that question was uncomfortably clear. I want to live. And, I want to die. Wow...part of me wants to die... wants to exit this life. I notice that it is very hard to admit that truth. I define myself as a champion for living... it is central to my work... it is how I usually strive to show up for others... it is a process that is primary for me. Wanting to die, however, is not -- it is a part that feels dark, and shameful, and unacceptable... not at all part of who I am. Well, time to take a further look.

As I got more curious about that part, and summoned a bit more courage and a bit less pride... I needed to take a dive beneath the surface on my own well of grief.

"Well of Grief" (Whyte 1990)

*Those who will not slip beneath  
the still surface on the well of grief*

*turning down to its black water  
to the place that we can not breathe*

*will never know  
the source from which we drink  
the secret water cold and clear*

*nor find in the darkness  
the small gold coins  
thrown by those who wished for something else*

And, in this exploration, sinking beneath the pressures of life's entanglements, the black grief of loss of those I have loved, rage at the unfairness of so much around me, I let myself imagine how it might be to just let go... to let go and die. Ahhh... breath. Breathing free... In that death I discovered an ultimate sense of freedom. That freedom that has no limits, where one becomes all, where there is no me and you or even an us. I imagine death to be a returning back into whatever free and universal spirit is... boundless, timeless, just being. To me, it is bliss. It is like lying in the grass and becoming the sun and the trees and the sky. It is the moment sitting on the lifeguard chair on the beach at night when I become the moon and the rippled water. This is what I am after.

Varrooommm... back to life, here and now. What an insight --- my deep desire is not for death, per se, but rather it is for freedom. I have longed for a greater sense of freedom all my life. Gratefully, I have many moments and periods of life when I experience freedom, and certainly growth over the years has brought me more degrees of freedom. And yet, in recent times, that freedom has been illusive and the more prevalent experience has been suffering.

*From the Wise Heart by Jack Kornfield (Kornfeld 2008):*

*Pain is physical, suffering is mental. Suffering is due entirely to clinging or resisting. It is a sign of our unwillingness to move, to flow with life. Although all life has pain, a wise life is free of suffering. A wise person is*

*friendly with the inevitable and does not suffer. Pain they know but it does not break them. If they can, they do what is possible to restore balance. If not, they let things take their course. --Nisargadatta*

What does all of this have to do with the Flying Trapeze and my fervent desire to join Cirque du Soleil?

After mentioning my upcoming trapeze lesson and nervous excitement to a dear teacher recently, she asked me to tell her about my earliest childhood dreams. That was easy... as a kid, I dreamt of many things but the one single-most common, vivid, and visceral dream was always, always, of flying. There was a period of time when on some level I was convinced that I knew how to fly...not just knew about flying, or imagined vividly what it must be like -- no, I KNEW how it felt to fly. I remember clearly the effort it took to take off into flight... the subtle maneuvering that was necessary with the wind and pressure of the air on my skin... the more uncertain it felt if I flew at a too-high height... the feeling of looking down on our house and farm, and of being able to steer my direction while in flight. And at the heart of those dreams was a sense of being free and unencumbered.

As I thought about it, memories came back of the many ways that this theme has always been present.

- I recalled the summer of 1968 when I was about 9 years old... and the giant oak tree at the end of the lane. I had bugged my Dad to create a trapeze for me in that specific tree, and finally he agreed to do it. This was not a swing like one you could sit on.... I wanted a TRAPEZE. I spent hours practicing my swinging, hanging from my knees, then dropping dramatically to swing from my ankles... and launching into a somersault dismount.
- After joining the swimming team a year or two later, I immediately knew that I was not supposed to be swimming, but rather diving... and that became the next pursuit. What I loved about springboard diving was the sense of flying through the air, either with outstretched arms like wings or curled into a spinning ball... but flying.
- Sheepish though I may feel to reveal it... there was also the time that I jumped from the roof of our house, much to the horror of my Mother who was doing dishes below, as Mary Poppins... with full get-up of dress, shoes, carpet-bag, and umbrella with a carefully crafted parrot-handle. I reached that umbrella up to the sky, leaned out, and flung myself from the roof of the house. Although I mainly got very skinned knees, I suspect I may have been leaping once again for freedom.
- To this day, my single-most visceral reference point for the feeling of freedom is figure skating on ice, which became my next pursuit as a teenager and young adult. The most full spiritual expression of freedom that I know is that moment, gliding fast over clean ice in a darkened arena -- the light reflecting off the ice... and of leaping from the ice in a long spinning jump.... or just reaching out and feeling the air rush by me.

As I had this conversation and shared these memories with my teacher, the connection which seems so obvious came into deeper clarity for me. I have often said that my purpose in life is to create more freedom -- for myself and for others. But as many times as I have said that, in a workshop or to students of mine -- it has always felt a bit, well, cerebral. A bit too rational. A bit too-well-worded. What I realized is that my desire for freedom, my own and yours, has always been at the center of my being. I have strived to find freedom from the inside-out... with my body.... always, in some way or another.

Realizing this, my Flying Trapeze lesson became much more meaningful. As I drove today to the New York Trapeze School, I thought about what really this meant for me. I thought about the suffering that I have been entangled in, and my desire to be free of it. I thought about how meaning in life, and a sense of being free, is not dependent on the absence of pain, or loss, or strife. Those are all a part of life. The quest is for greater degrees of meaning and freedom in the midst of all that life offer to us, good or bad, each and every day.... in fact in every moment. I am not solid yet in my capacity to be in that experience much of the time, but I am becoming more clear that it is the quest that I am on -- to build or reveal or discover or uncover that capacity.

Well, let's just say that they don't waste much time at the Trapeze School. It is pretty much, "OK, everyone ready? Let's go...." At various moments, I noticed my fear and my trembling and my doubt... my concern that my arms would not have enough strength, or that I would fall the wrong way. And in each of those moments I



remembered why I was doing this. I thought of the phrase "reach out for freedom...." and I connected with the yearning in my heart for that freedom. I need to remember those moments, because I know that I am always choosing which way to lean.... toward freedom, or toward suffering. I am always choosing which voice to listen to... the one who says things like "you can't.... you shouldn't... there is no use...." or the one who says "just do it.... lean in.... trust yourself.... trust others.... follow your desire...."

And so I flew.... from the bar... from my knees... and ultimately letting go of the bar and catching hold of the catcher and flying. I left giddy with excitement and a great sense of YES. More importantly, it gave me a boost to get unstuck and actually write this --- I feel a greater sense of purpose and direction. A new quest is emerging in me around this theme of freedom, and of what it means to be free and choose to live at the same time.

## *Blog Post 2: The Platform*

The 30 seconds or so up on the platform BEFORE getting ready for the swing are intense, chaotic moments of panic, anticipation, doubt, and indecision. In spite of that seemingly calm demeanor, there is a swirl of things going on in my head and my body.... the stream of consciousness goes something like: *Oh my God... I don't have to do this... my heart is fluttering.... I can find a good excuse to back out.... no, follow what you want.... but you don't have to... you have heart disease you shouldn't do this.... go for it!*

These are the moments before choosing, and as I wait for my turn I am most aware of all of the reasons that I do not want to do it, and all of the ways that it would be completely reasonable to turn around and climb back down to the safety of the ground. And yet, I stay --- I know that in just a few seconds I will step out to the edge of the platform, will lean out and grab the trapeze, and squarely face the opportunity in front of me. I have been reading books by Carlos Castaneda recently and in his journey with Don Juan he learns to distinguish between the Hunter and the Warrior. In these moments up on the platform, the HUNTER in me is active.... the part that notices with acute perception what is happening on the platform, in my mind, in my arms and legs and toes, and in my heart. Just as the hunter in the forest listens and feels the most subtle shifts in the wind or sounds around him, the hunter within me strives to notice what is happening... my breath and beating heart, my doubts and urges to flee, and the undercurrent of fervent desire for something. The hunter notices all of these signals, and with awareness selects the ones to pay attention to and to follow... the hunter points the way. If the Hunter is awake, then the choice that I make is made consciously.

My turn comes, and I step up, inching my toes to the edge, holding a safety bar on the platform, and stretching my whole body out over the platform to grasp the waiting trapeze. I look out and down and all around --- this is it, it is right in front of me. In just a few seconds I know I will here the call of the "Ready! Hup!" "Breathe," I tell myself. "Notice that you WANT something here.... the rush of leaping and moving into this experience... you want to give yourself to this, to seize it..." At this point, I have made the choice to move directly into this experience. I still notice the parts of me that are afraid and that doubt. My heart beats fast, and I remind myself to breathe. I notice that I am committed to leaping. "Feel your toes.... raise the trapeze bar UP.... breathe again" I say inside. I hear the "Ready!" and bend both my knees. Then I hear "Hup" and I jump up and out. "Yes! You are moving IN..." This is a thrilling moment of the entering into the experience. It is a bit like the second that a rollercoaster car reaches that split moment just over the top of the hill when it begins to move DOWN.... it is going, it is on its track... it builds a momentum of its own and it is not coming back. It is the Warrior in me that has chosen to leap, that chooses with intention to "enter into" the experience, to step over the line beyond the point of no return, There is a paradoxical surrendering to the experience while simultaneously acting from will and intention. An unpredictable whoosh of experience occurs that I am both "in" and that I am "present to." The Warrior has the capacity to act with both agency and surrender, moving fully into and through the experience while observing it at the same time. It is not comfortable. It is, however, very ALIVE.

[wpvideo amK7w8v5]

There are many important moments in life when I find myself at a crossroads of choice. In front of me, something that I want, that excites me, perhaps that I am frightened by but I know is needed, that has about it the urgent quality of something important being at stake. Something that the most fundamental and real part of me knows to be the true path. At that crossroad is also doubt, reluctance, and when something really matters fear and even terror. This part wants to shrink back... wants to seek comfort of the familiar... wants the security of avoiding possibly painful moments of physical or emotional hurt. Very often, I choose to remain on the platform, to shrink back and stay safe... and I realize that in that place I suffer. I have spent a lot of time in this mode.... on the platform of life, suffering. In this mode, I tell myself that there is some later moment in life when I can take the risky step. The thing is, there is no such thing as later because all we have is right now -- this moment --- to choose to live or choose to die.

Recently I have noticed in a profound way the difference between remaining on the platform suffering, and choosing to enter into the difficult and scary place in my personal and professional relationships. When I feel afraid, I tend to worry A LOT what other people will think and how they will react. The prospect of making others angry or saying something that might prompt someone to reject me can be terrifying for me. It is the neurotic tendency described by Karen Horney as "complying." When I have had difficulty in relationships, my tendency has often been to avoid confrontation... to shy away from being direct and honest when I have something difficult to say. In the framework

of Process-Oriented Psychology, it is a tremendous edge for me. As a result, I have spent lots of time on the platform suffering... in some cases I have stayed on that platform fretting back and forth for years with certain people who are close to me. A recent experience stands out for me with a friend and colleague who is someone that I highly respect and deeply love -- and yet I have been suffering in this relationship for way too long. In a recent interaction, I suddenly realized that I was "on the platform" and the hunter became active. He noticed my fear, my sweaty palms, and the butterflies in my stomach. He noticed, too, a longing for agency and self-authority. He noticed the impulses of the child inside afraid of rejection, and he noticed love for this person and a desire for something more real and true. I am not sure if it was a Warrior-energy or not, but I made the choice to follow what felt true, stepped to the edge, and spoke directly and honestly about the things that disturbed me in our way of interacting. It was tremendously uncomfortable, and also tremendously alive. On the other side of that experience, I realize that my compassion for this friend has deepened --- I have more space, and more love. We may or may not be able to reconstruct a new relationship, but I know that whatever we have will be cleaner and more authentic. And, I have discovered a new capacity within myself... still a bit wobbly... but growing, to follow the signals of my heart with greater courage and authenticity.

*Hope for the Guest*

*Friend, hope for the Guest while you are alive.  
 Jump into experience while you are alive!  
 Think...and think...while you are alive.  
 What you call "salvation" belongs to the time  
 before death.*

*If you don't break your ropes while you're alive,  
 do you think ghosts will do it after?*

*The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic  
 just because the body is rotten...  
 that is all fantasy.*

*What is found now is found then.  
 If you find nothing now,  
 you will simply end up with an apartment in the  
 City of Death.*

*If you make love with the divine now, in the next  
 life you will have the face of satisfied desire.*

*So plunge into the truth, find out who the Teacher is,  
 Believe in the Great Sound!*

*Kabir says this: When the Guest is being searched for  
 it is the intensity of the longing for the Guest that  
 does all the work.*

*Look at me, and you will see a slave of that intensity.  
 (Bly 2004)*

So, what happened back on that trapeze? In this class I was learning a new trick called a SET HOCKS OFF. There is a real thrill in doing a trick and at the end reaching out for the catcher and making the catch. Here is my Set Hocks Off! Please add your comments to this post --- it is very gratifying to see what reactions feelings or thoughts get prompted in others.

(Video Segment)

### *Blog Post 3: Failure*

What does it mean to SURRENDER oneself completely? Falling in love with my husband. Being swept down the river rapids in a raft. Body-surfing the crest of a wave. Facilitating a hot group dynamic when I am "on." All of these have a quality of surrender for me --- of letting myself go into and embrace a greater force that PULLS me. It is a force that is greater than I am -- the force of love, of rushing water, of a group process and the human spirit that wants to express itself. On the Flying Trapeze I have progressed to being an "advanced beginner," which means that I am now working on taking off from the platform on my own, building my SWING, and learning some basic "back-end" tricks. It may not appear to be as fancy as a trapeze catch trick, but the SWING is an amazing and magical thing --- and the most challenging and disorienting thing I have yet experienced. It is, well, a wild rush. It is teaching me to recognize my ways of responding when I step or leap or dive into a force that is greater than I am.

In these situations in LIFE or on the TRAPEZE....

.... Sometimes I close my eyes, grit my teeth, pretend it is not happening, and I shut-down until it is all over. My body tightens, I go into survival mode, and I tell myself to hang on until it is over. Hmm.... sounds like what sometimes happens to me in a difficult conversation with someone I care about, or say, when I am confronted in a challenging way by a group I am leading. The first few times that I tried the Trapeze Swing this is what I did ---- held on tight and shut down until I heard someone yell "let go!" This is what I would call **RESISTING THE FORCE**.

....Other times I surrender to the force and get completely lost and disoriented... it sweeps me away. Hmmm.... sounds like when I find myself on an emotional ride and become completely confused and uncentered, or when I work with a group and get bounced around so much that I become completely ineffective. On the Trapeze, my Swing attempts after the first few were like this. I would leap from the platform, surrender to the momentum of the swing and a rush of dizzying disorientation would overwhelm me. Each time the Trapeze would reach its top height and begin to fall again in the other direction, my stomach would swoop up to my throat and the "Whooooaaaaaaa!" of vertigo would take over. In this state which I call **SWEPT AWAY** I am lost and at the mercy of whatever the force is that has me... be it love, anger, rushing water, or the swoop of the Trapeze.

.... I am just beginning to now get a glimpse of the magic of the swing and what is possible, and the incredible power that can come when SURRENDER, PRESENCE, and INTENTION occur simultaneously.... when I am aware of the force and of myself at the same time that I embrace it, surrender to it, and allow it to carry me. When that happens, I become one with the force... I can create from and with it.... I can impact it as it is impacting me. So I think of my relationships -- the people who are dearest to me --- and moments that we enter into a conflict or difficulty. In the best moments, I surrender to it and embrace it --- and move forward towards it with presence and a conscious intent to deepen the relationship. Or, I think of a tense group dynamic that I am facilitating and moments when I am able to move right into the energy that is happening while at the same time noticing what is happening and holding one level of awareness on my role or intent to have some sort of impact. In these scenarios if I can surrender to what is happening it becomes a force that I am able to create from. On the Trapeze, I am beginning to see that the SWING is all about this force and my ability to become one with it, rather than being about my strength or ability to "force" it to happen the right way.

I am very much a beginner at this SWING, and suspect that I have merely scratched the surface. This feels like a really worthwhile muscle to build, and I wonder in my life.... if I were able to more fully SURRENDER with PRESENCE and INTENTION to the situations around me, what might become possible.

(Video Segment)

FAILURE. Often as a leader of teams and groups I can inspire others about how wonderful it is to learn from failure, and how wonderful it is to risk failure... some reading this have heard me say that. OK, guess what. I think failure sucks. True Confession: The reason that I usually have succeeded with many things in life is because I have made sure that I quit before I failed. Ughh. I hate failure and most things related to it... I hate being afraid of it.... I

hate being viewed as it..... and I have always worked pretty hard to avoid it. And, OK, yes..... boy it sure is a good teacher.

On the Flying Trapeze I am experiencing lots of failure --- and rather than avoid it I want to share it right up front (see my Bloopers video below). A few weeks ago I had what felt like a disastrous Trapeze class.... I just could not get it together, and just about every time I leapt from the platform something went wrong. Finally, I told the instructors that I had had it and was leaving... it just wasn't my day. As I was leaving, I slowly became aware of how I was feeling and of the thoughts racing through my head. I felt angry and frightened and very discouraged --- the Trapeze is getting a bit more difficult and I am afraid of hurting myself. I felt very angry with myself for failing. And I said to myself "I cannot do this.... it is too hard for me.... I am too old, too fat, too weak, too inflexible.... if I keep doing it I will look like an idiot.... I might get hurt.... I need to quit now...."

I stopped in my tracks because I realized that often in my life I have found myself in that very same state --- and on various important occasions I have surrendered (been swept away) by that state and have quit. It took me right back to the moment in 10th grade when I quit the High School Diving Team because I was too afraid of getting hurt or failing on the more difficult dives.... I knew that if I continued I would have lots of painful failure and I wanted to avoid it, so I walked away. Professionally I have declined complex opportunities when I have been too frightened of failure, or too discouraged when things have not gone my way. Personally there have been too many occasions when my fear of failing or being hurt in a relationship has compelled me to walk away, or consider doing so.

And so, I chose to sink more deeply into that experience of failure.... down down and down more to explore what I might find at the bottom. It is, for me, a dark abyss, like being at the bottom of a very deep well. And there at the bottom is a very frightened little person, surrounded by the menacing dangers of life that loom large and threaten to destroy. It feels very primal to me... the terror of being obliterated, and the raging force of destruction -- perhaps forces that are fundamentally embedded into the human DNA and emerge in me in my own particular way. As I explore these energies more I find that they transform, one into a sense of open vulnerability, sensitivity, fragility, and innocence; the other into a ferocity, passion, and white-hot WILL TO LIVE. Ahhh... transformed, these are energies that I can make good use of when I find myself in my own moments of wanting to give up and abandon my quests. Actually, it seems like what I am learning in the Swing of the Trapeze --- there is a surrender involved to the discomfort and pain of failing --- there is an energy to it. My intent is to bring more presence into that experience, and allow it to bring forth the creative force of intention.

Please do feel free to chuckle as you watch this one...you will not be the first to do so ; )

(video segment)

I did "climb back up the ladder" and returned for two classes last week --- very determined to improve the "Back-End Straddle Whip" that I had so much difficulty with before. I found myself laughing and enjoying the failures more, and made some improvements with the trick.... I am filled with excitement about continuing this journey --- on one level it is simply fun. On another level it is serving as a great structure to strengthen my resolve to work out, eat well, do yoga. And more than that it is working for me in a profound way to explore what makes me tick, and what makes me more free -- and that is my quest. If you have reactions to my musings, please leave them with a comment -- I appreciate it greatly.

(video segment)

### *Blog Post 4: Who Will Catch Me?*

Funny how sometimes the biggest learnings come from unforeseen places. I have decided, finally, to hang up my tights and bring an end to my Flying Trapeze career, much to the relief of my heart and sore shoulders. You see, throughout the seven months of Trapeze classes, a tiny soft voice kept nudging me in various moments.... "uh, excuse me.... are you sure this activity will be good for you? You, um, have heart disease, remember?" As is often the case in life, I tend to push that voice to the side until it screams more loudly for recognition..."OK, bud.... how about if I rip some of the tendons in your shoulders.... will that get your attention?" On a deeper level, the process had me grapple more directly with my tendency toward reckless stimulation at the expense of taking better care of myself. It raised the question -- on the Trapeze and in Life --- Who Will Catch Me? I will come back to this theme, but first want to share what I have learned about the RELEASE part of the Flying Trapeze.

One way or another when doing the Flying Trapeze, there comes a moment when you must release the bar.... either to fly into the air, to reach for the catcher, or simply to let go and drop into the net. Hmm.... sounds a bit like life. One way or another when living a life there comes a moment when each one of us dies... a moment when our physical life ends and somehow we let go and release.

In my brief career as a Flyer, I have experienced many swings where I have mostly just clung to the bar, chalky palms gripping as tightly as they can all the while saying to myself "just hang on, it will be over soon..." During these swings, my main focus is to hang on tightly to the one thing that I think is secure - namely, the bar. And then.... yes, every single time.... comes a moment when I have arrived at the end of the swing and there I am still clinging to the bar... either to linger a bit longer or not.... but ultimately with just one option and direction to go. On some other swings, I allowed myself to actually BE in the swing - to immerse in it, to feel it, to experience it. These swings, some with tricks and some just for practice, were exhilarating and alive and truly wondrous with a savoring of each brief moment in the air. But... I notice that either way I have chosen to do it, the swing still ends up in the same place --- with the need to let go.

(video segment)

I relish the experience of freedom. I feel grateful to experience a sense of freedom often in my life -- they are the moments when I am connected to everything and to nothing all at the same time. It happens in the quiet moments in the early morning when I sit outside in my garden and something catches my eye. It happens when I connect deeply with another and feel the intimate human thread that connects us all... every single one of us. It happens in transcendent moments when I gaze out to the sea... when I gain the biggest picture possible. I notice that "free" does not mean the same thing as "happy" -- it comes in moments of grief as well, particularly when people who I love have died and I feel their spirit around and within me.

I am aware, too, of the vast amount of time I spend in a state that is far from the experience of freedom -- when I feel trapped in some sort of spiral that is hard to escape. As I think of those times, it seems that fear is most common element --- fear of losing something.... my family, my financial security, my health, my reputation, my status or power. As I reflect on myself in that state, I see that out of that fear I cling tightly to the identities that I have created to define me to the world around me --- like ivory castle towers that now must be maintained and defended against some unknown threat. If I just cling tightly enough I will somehow survive until the end...

I have been lucky to have found several soulmates in this life. One of them and the first, Cydney, taught me very valuable lessons about living and dying before she lost her battle with breast cancer twelve years ago. Death was an ally that woke her up in the final years of her life, that prompted her to knock down the ivory towers of her identity to live her life fully before leaving. I read this poem at her funeral, and it is always close to my heart:

*I will not die an unlived life.  
I will not live in fear  
of falling or catching fire.*

*I choose to inhabit my days,  
to allow my living to open me,  
to make me less afraid,  
more accessible;  
to loosen my heart  
until it becomes a wing,  
a torch, a promise.*

*I choose to risk my significance,  
to live so that which came to me as seed  
goes to the next as blossom,  
and that which came to me as blossom,  
goes on as fruit.*

(Markova 2000)

In the “here and now” objective world we live in, I am many things and wear many hats, each bringing aspects that construct my identity. Some aspects have well honed skills and others - by design - do not... some hats I relish wearing and others frustrate me. In some moments these parts of me are happy, satisfied or proud -- and in others are terrified or sad or lonely. I am a husband, a brother, a man, a neighbor, a consultant, a coach, an uncle, a friend, a competitor, a student, a teacher, a citizen... lots of identities that overlap in various ways... each with its own set of expectations and hopes and fears. These “real” aspects of me are sometimes content and sometimes not - but rarely experience what I would call *freedom*. When it seems to me that “I am” these things - that they represent who I am - a potential suddenly also exists that I might somehow lose them... that they could be lost or stolen or discarded. And then, of course, if that were to happen, who would I then be? This illusion creates a frightened clamoring and clinging and striving to hang on... to build the ivory tower walls higher or make them more impenetrable. For this reason the shaman Don Juan counsels his student Castaneda that he must "lose his personal history." This clinging to identity feels much like clinging to the Trapeze bar high above the net.

On another level, a more dreamland and fantastic level --- I am an adventurer, a romantic, a lover, a wizard, a daredevil and risk-taker, a dog-whisperer, a dancer, an activist and an alchemist. These are aspects of who I imagine and dream myself to be, and they bring a zest and meaning and color to life. As I notice these dreamy parts, I notice too what seems to be missing from this list... where is the self-nurturer and caretaker and steward? Somewhere along the way, that part got marginalized and cast aside. These parts reach toward freedom... they stretch me and grow me... they bring a rich texture to life that transforms in from a series of events into an unfolding mythic story. While I approach the doorway to freedom in these dreamlike states, these figures do not quite carry me the whole way through.

Then, there is another level even deeper than dreams of sentient essence and transcendent experience. This is an ineffable state and the moment that I describe it with any words it becomes diminished from what it is... I can only point to it. I know that it is state that I have always known. My earliest memories of it come from when I would walk down to the beach as a young boy late at night and find an empty Lifeguard Chair. I would climb up to the seat, way above the deserted beach, and gaze out over the sea to simply look at the moon and its reflection on the water.



Soon my fixed identities and even dreamlike figures would disappear and I someone knew that everything made sense and that I was a part of it all... as though part of me was the moon reflecting on itself in the water. That was a space of freedom.

I have written before of my fascination with flying and love for figure skating on ice or springboard diving... early precursors to the Flying Trapeze. Sometimes I dream of those moments and have the experience of disappearing into the movement and the music... of somehow becoming it. In those moments too, I know freedom.





And so, this brings me back to the question: *Who Catches Me?*

My ally Death helps me to answer this question, because he keeps me vigilant and conscious that this life is fleeting and precious. Death will come as it does to all its time, but it is not here quite yet. He has introduced me to a new idea of The Catcher... the one who cares for me, nurtures me, sustains me. In the "here and now" level of things, it is the part of me that is aware enough to recognize choices I make every day of how I eat and move and sleep and work and relax.. who has attention on what actions serve me and the parts I want to grow, and what actions do

not. He is learning to pay closer attention to the subtle signals poking me for attention. On another level, the more dreamlike one, there is a new archetype present that I do not know very well... the benevolent, compassionate, and nurturing one who values this life I have.... who knows that I deserve to be here and that life is worth living... who knows that regardless of what may go on around me, that I myself am trustworthy. I plan to spend more time getting to know this one.

And, beneath all of that.... when I realize that ultimately there is not really anyone here to catch me (or any of us) in the end and I ask myself, well then *Who Catches Me?* I think of what indigenous tribes refer to as the Sacred Hoop of Life that contains us all -- the place that I know well from my time atop the Life Guard Chair as a young boy. In the Sacred Hoop of Life I am and we are all held. I have always been shy about acknowledging the spiritual essence of who I am and how I experience life, and yet I know it to be the most rich source of freedom available. And that is the essence of it, of freedom, and it is here around us and in us in every moment... It is freedom here and now in life, not an imagined freedom that may or may not come in death. I plan to spend more time knowing this place, too.

## References

- Bly, R. (2004). Kabir: Ecstatic Poems - Versions by Robert Bly. Boston, Beacon Press.
- Castaneda, C. (1972). Journey to Ixtlan. New York, NY, Washington Square Press.
- Castaneda, C. (1998). The Teachings of Don Juan - A Yaqui Way of Knowledge. Los Angeles, CA, University of California Press.
- Kornfeld, J. (2008). The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology. New York, Random House.
- Levine, S. (1982). Who Dies?: An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying. New York, NY, Random House.
- Markova, D. (2000). I Will Not Die and Unlived Life: Reclaiming Purpose and Passion. Berkeley, California, Conari Press.
- Mindell, A. (1993). The Shaman's Body: A New Shamanism for Transforming Health, Relationships, and the Community. San Francisco, CA, Harper Collins.
- Mindell, A. (2000). Dreaming While Awake: Techniques for 24-Hour Lucid Dreaming. Charlottesville, VA, Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc.
- Mindell, A. (2010). Process Mind: A User's Guide to Connecting with the Mind of God. Wheaton, IL, Theosophical Publishing House.
- Whyte, D. (1990). Where Many Rivers Meet. Langley, Washington, Many Rivers Publisher.