

Free Fall

By Gwen Gordon

Most of us have experienced magical moments when, without planning or preparation we catch a glimpse of our unbounded true Self. It often happens when we least expect it –watching a sunset, jumping out of an airplane, soaking in the bathtub. At these times, our well-socialized, incessantly monitored identity seems to fall away and, like wild animals released from captivity, our whole being leaps into play. All those rules, those laws and regulations, all the training and inhibitions disappear. We are left falling back on our own inner senses, free to feel the pure impulses of the flesh and spirit, the anarchy of the soul. We think “Oh, what a joy. What a relief, not to be so damned preoccupied, so self-absorbed, for one blissful minute.” We can see – in a safe, contained way – how loosely civilization actually holds our lives. No wonder that visionaries like William Blake believed humans trip into a religious state. Every fall “falls” outside the world of gesture and contrivance. Every fall is a “free fall.” And every free fall opens our whole being to play.

Ten years ago, I took this business of free fall literally and jumped out of an airplane for the first time. My sister had invited me to try it and I figured I had a good chance of surviving. After all, Dale was the women’s freestyle skydiving world champion and had been for five consecutive years. She had survived over 5,000 jumps and still couldn’t get enough of it. Her enthusiasm was contagious, so I said “yes.”

At the airport I received my instructions. I will be strapped to an experienced jumper called a tandem master. There will be only two things to remember: 1) Let go, and 2) breathe. It was all laid out for me -- In 20 minutes I will be standing on the wing

of a small airplane 13,000 feet off the ground. Millions of years of genetic programming will kick in, screaming, “DO NOT LET GO!” Let go. Then, as my little sack of flesh and bones rushes toward the hard Earth at a 150 mph, I arch my back and breathe. At 5,000 feet, I get a tap on the shoulder. This is my cue to pull the ripcord. Pull the ripcord.

“You’re going to love it,” grins my sister.

As the plane climbs, my heart rate climbs with it -- 1, 3, 7, 13,000 feet. The plane starts shaking like a sardine can. I get a nod. It’s time. The tandem master and I shuffle carefully onto the wing. Then it hits me. I am standing on the wing of an airplane strapped to a complete stranger. There is only one way down. This is really happening.

“LET GO!” he yells over the din. I let go.

AAAAAAAARRR! Icy wind slaps my face, roars in my ears, rushes up my nose. My nostrils flare out to meet my ears and my whole body freezes at this onslaught of sensation. There was a second instruction. What was it? Oh yeah, “Breathe!” I gasp. Then my sister comes into view. She is beaming and waving at me, then flies over, kisses me on the cheek and swoops away spinning and flipping like a wild animal just released from captivity. I stare in awe as my own graceless biomass plunges straight down. Then comes a tap on the shoulder. I reach, fumble, grab and yank. The canopy opens, jerking me upward. Suddenly I’m floating silently above the world. I take a deep breath and begin to make sense of my situation.

It’s simple. The sky is vast and blue and I am floating in it. Fields, rooftops, factories, and forests are specks below me because I’m hanging from a parachute 3,000 feet above them. I marvel at the sight of my feet dangling right below me, then nothing. There is just foreground and background; no middle ground. How strange and beautiful

and precious every detail feels as it rises into view: The valley, the airport, the parking lot, my car. This is my home. I belong here. Landing, I kiss the ground.

A week later I am strapped, as it were, to a different kind of master. I'm moving into a yoga ashram for a few months with yogi Amrit Desai. He tells me there are only two things to remember; 1) Let go, and; 2) breathe. This time, instead of letting go of an airplane wing, I'm supposed to let go of all effort at meditation and any grasping for a sense of self. Then, I'm supposed to just breathe as I free fall into my unbounded true nature. Like my sister, Amrit just beams, "it's easy, you're going to love it." Then he leaps, spins, and twirls, having the time of his life. I am amazed by his creativity, the lightness of his being, the freshness of his mind, and the way he responds perfectly to the needs of the moment. Next to Amrit I feel like a mass of clenched flesh holding on for dear life.

At the same time, I recognize the quality of freedom I feel in him. I often feel it when I dance, paint, and sing, or during juicy conversations, tug of war with my dog, and making love. I get it when I'm fully present and I'm most often present when I'm playing. In fact, it seems that the purpose of spiritual practice isn't just to be free from suffering as the Buddha taught! The purpose of practice, of discipline, of jumping 5,000 times out of the ego's grip is to be free to play! This is what I feel in the Dalai Lama's irresistible giggle, in Chogyam Trungpa's teachings on crazy wisdom, and in all the rascally, unorthodox Zen masters who make up the rules and trip their students out of their minds. They all show us that when we wake up, we wake up to life as play. The vision of life as play is what inspires my practice--not the Buddha's endless lists, the

abstract idea of nirvana, or the company of solemn, pious practitioners. What inspires me is my love of play. And what it takes to live life as play is free fall into our true nature.

Free fall? Nothing terrifies and fascinates us more. Born and raised as separate fragile egos, it seems that letting go can be deadly. If we don't constantly manage and control our experience, we could fall apart, fall from grace, or fall to bits. At the same time, our souls are crying for the burst of color and belly laughs, the zest and intimacy of play. It's just no fun living in the gray box of a predictable, controlled life, or working hard, and holding it together so that we might be free one day down the road. We feel half dead. We know there's more. But it takes more than just knowing we want it, to make us willing and able to break the deep habits that keep us "safe." It takes something very basic and immediate, compelling and irresistible.

And then it occurs to me, if the ability to play with everything is the fruit of practice, then perhaps play itself could become a practice. If we awaken into play, maybe we can also play ourselves awake. In fact, perhaps every time we play, we practice a little free fall so that we're able to let go a little more each time. If that's true, I wondered, then what kinds of play are the most liberating? Chess? Soccer? Square dancing?

It turns out that the play that's most liberating, that helps us let go where our grip is the tightest, is also the most fun. The thrill of play is that it lets us be in control of being out of control. We don't just jump out of an airplane without a parachute for the sensation of free fall. That would be suicidal. We strap ourselves into gear and onto people who know what they're doing in order to give ourselves a little experience of free fall and survive. Sure, I was scared when I did it, but I also knew I was safe. That's play. Young children get a blast out of playing peek-a-boo because they get a sense of mastery

over their fear of being abandoned. Watching someone disappear from view is a little free fall when you're two years old. Then, peek-a-boo! the parachute opens and all is well in the world again. Wheeeee. Tee hee hee hee.

I may not get as much of a rush from a game of peek-a-boo with my mother as I did when I was two, but I do get a thrill from a game of peek-a-boo with the divine. Just last week, I was walking to the grocery store thinking about how I need to talk to a friend about something important, but I know he's terribly busy and so am I and so how... and then right then and there, in the middle of the thought, I bump into him on a bench eating a Burrito. Peek-a-boo. Feeling the presence of a force beyond my conscious mind is so delicious partly because I didn't even realize it was missing. I only noticed the back brain hum of anxiety when it stops. Oh, so I'm not alone in a meaningless, soulless, unfriendly universe after all. Feeling the presence of a loving cosmos, I can let go even more. Wheeeee. Tee hee hee.

When I pay attention, I can see that the universe is constantly winking at me, playing peek-a-boo and tapping me on the shoulder inviting me to let go, "It's fun, you're going to love it." The friendliest invitations come in the form of dreams and synchronicities. But sometimes it takes a little more force to peel my grip from the wing of the airplane. A few years ago, I was directing a PBS children's television show called Kids, Cash, and Common Sense, teaching children about money. I was fighting with the producer, getting overwhelmed by and caught up on details, and losing sleep. On the first morning of production, I saw that I had almost no gas in the car. Then I saw that I had no cash in my wallet. There was no time to go to the ATM, so I emptied my penny jar, counted out the change, took it in a bag with me and piled it on the cashier's counter at

the gas station. I was living in almost exact detail, one of the scenes from the show meant to help children become more conscious and aware of financial realities. I could practically hear a trickster giggling from beyond the veil.

When trickster shows up and we trip on ourselves, he gives us the choice, get grumpy and complain or laugh it off and get back to the playground. Every trip invites us to let go and breathe into free fall. We encounter the trickster when we've become rigid, oblivious, or mindlessly mechanical. He yanks us back into being present so that we can get back into the play. Each peek-a-boo we get from the universal playmate, whether a gentle tandem master or a mischievous trickster, is a tap reminding us that we're strapped in, as it were, held gently but firmly no matter what's going on, so let go and play already.

Sometimes I don't feel held and it doesn't feel safe and the last thing I want to do is play, thank you very much. Even though I clutch the airplane wing for dear life, I still feel like I'm falling 150 miles per hour. The wind is roaring, my nostrils have reached my ears, the ground is getting closer and there's no parachute. Sure, I let go once, but that's what got me into this predicament in the first place and I'll be damned if I'm going to let go again. So I clench. Heeeeeelp. What does it take to keep letting go when every cell in your body screams "DO NOT, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, LET GO!"?

Courage? Yes! A tandem master strapped to the back of your psyche tapping you on the shoulder? That helps. But more than that, for the free fall to be play takes a center that holds under pressure. My sister got her composure from jumping 5,000 times. I get it when I let go in meditation.

In my sitting practice, just as in play, I have control over being out of control. For 30 minutes a day I get to decide exactly how much I will let go. Eventually, if I can stay with the free fall and not grab the wing of that rickety little airplane, my presence drops beneath the constant flux of sensation to the stillness at the very center of my being and everything slows down. As I do, my ability to stay centered in the face of sensation gets stronger. According to potter, poet, and sage, M.C. Richards, centering is “the bringing of the clay into a spinning, unwobbling pivot, which will then be free to take innumerable shapes as potter and clay press against each other.” I’m cultivating a radically portable center, one that I can take anywhere, on or off the ground, into extreme suffering or ecstatic bliss.

Once centered, I can surrender to the shaping forces of the world that open me wider and wider to hold more and more. My meditation is just like jumping out of an airplane, pure play. I’m intentionally practicing the art of free fall and each fall gives me a little more mastery, which is play. After over 5,000 jumps, my sister has mastery in the sky. It’s beautiful and inspiring to watch the freedom and joy, ease and brilliance of her movement. Through my own practice, I’ve found more freedom and grace at work, in relationships, traffic jams, and empty wallets because with a stronger center I can risk feeling more, I can stay more present and at play in my daily life. Living life as play in free fall is the best game in town.

When I first jumped out of the plane, the tumult of sensations overwhelmed me. I had no sense of falling in a vast wide-open sky. When the parachute opened and slowed me down my perceptions became well coordinated and acute. I could see the truth – that my little legs were always just dangling in the middle of a clear, blue sky. Being held in

gentle stillness by my practice, I can behold the vast blue sky of my own nature and the beauty and preciousness of the world. The universe has been winking at me all along, holding me gently, inviting me to play. It is safe to come close, to feel and engage intimately with life exactly as it is. I can also feel the ground of being where I have always belonged. Landing, I kiss the playground.