

# COMMITMENT

*No transformation comes from a place of comfort. Sometimes, everything has to dissolve before something new can be resurrected.*

PERCHED HIGH ATOP a tiny trapeze platform overlooking the Hudson River, I quickly took stock of my surroundings. Here I was outside on the rooftop of an industrial building at Pier 40 in Chelsea, home of a venerable trapeze school; all around me the riggings of a trapeze apparatus and below me the net swayed like a giant, oversize hammock. I had only a moment to notice the Statue of Liberty to the right and Lower Manhattan to the left before adrenaline crashed through me like a flash flood, jamming my systems and narrowing my field of vision. Here was the iconic skyline of New York City, yet all I could see was the blinding white of the trapeze bar I gripped in my hands. The blood pounding in my ears silenced everything. Down below, reggae music blasted, people laughed and talked, horns honked, sirens blared—all the rich and jumbled sounds of the Big Apple. But it was oddly quiet as I

leaned forward and listened intently for the command to jump: A single syllable, shouted with intensity: “*Hep!*”

There is only a first time once. When the coach shouted “*Hep!*” I leapt without hesitation, and the trapeze bar instantly hurtled me through the air. I swung way, way up—my feet pointing straight at the sun, feeling strangely weightless until the arc of my swing diminished to nothing, and my hands began to throb from their clenched hold on the bar. Every sinew in my arms burned, my failing grip the only factor keeping me from succumbing to the thing I dreaded most—free-falling into the net.

“Let go and fall,” shouted the coach.

Letting go is one leap of faith. Falling is another. Having to surrender to both at the same time was more than I was capable of doing at that moment. I hung on, trembling, until my arms and hands couldn’t bear it. Then, one blood-curdling scream later, I was bouncing on my back in the net.

I DIDN’T JUST WAKE UP one morning and decide to run off and join the circus for a day. I’d been thinking a lot about my last canyoneering adventure, which was at that time my ninth trip, and how I’d finally become comfortable with all of it; the heights, the ambiguity, the danger. Introspection after each adventure had revealed a really critical nugget of information: I do not have a fear of heights, as I’d believed for some time. My fear, it turned out, was and is a fear of the *edge*. This is an incredibly important distinction. Throughout my adult life, that perceived fear of heights blocked me from enjoying many things because I *thought* I’d be afraid. Realizing that my fear was more specific,

more focused, and more explicable (what normal, sane person *wouldn’t* be afraid of a precipice?) released me into a world of possibility I didn’t think could exist for me. I’d lost many chances for adventure simply because I’d convinced myself I had a fear I really didn’t have.

So, when canyoneering became relatively comfortable, I wondered if I had truly “conquered” my fear of the edge. How would I know, if the sandstone ledges and emerald green waterfalls no longer made my knees knock? I needed another test. Something different but equally fierce. A tandem jump out of an airplane, strapped to a copilot, wouldn’t suffice—I wanted something that would make me take the leap on my own. After much head scratching, I came up with what I thought would be a respectable test—a session on a flying trapeze. It had both height and edge. I’d never done anything like it, didn’t know a thing about it, and figured it had great potential to scare the living crap out of me.

I booked my trapeze lesson to coincide with the conclusion of a business meeting in New York City. The school was located on the rooftop of an industrial building on the Chelsea waterfront, only four miles from where I was staying. I gave myself plenty of time to get there, but I learned, as I sat in a cab in Manhattan gridlock, that there were going to be some hurdles to overcome before I actually got to take the plunge. Hurdle number one: getting there. It took one hour to go four miles. Honestly, a turtle with a limp could have made better time than my cab made. I was 30 minutes late and missed most of the ground instruction.

Hurdle number two: finding clothes that were tight enough not to shift and blow and expose parts of me while I was hanging upside down but not so tight as to reveal my deep, abiding love

for double chocolate chip ice cream. I wore a pair of old leggings that did the trick but were, in places, threadbare. I hoped no one was going to be looking too closely.

By the time I arrived at trapeze school, the instructor was just finishing the orientation. A tiny, five-foot blonde, the instructor looked at me with one raised eyebrow and said, “Watch the others go first, then ask me if you have any questions.” Since everyone was donning their trapeze harnesses, I did, too, mimicking their every move. The trapeze harness—a wide, thick, white belt worn at the waist—had metal rings at various locations around its circumference and was infinitely more comfortable than a climbing harness.

The instructor wrote our names on a dry-erase board next to the ladder leading up to the trapeze platform. True to her word, she scribbled my name at number six. I had five chances to watch everyone succeed or fail, and learn from whatever mayhem ensued.

Flier number five, a stocky, muscular man in his mid-30s, couldn’t get his posture right. The net coach on the ground—a young man in his 20s—wouldn’t let number five jump until he corrected it. “Lean out, lean out,” the coach shouted. “Stop sticking your butt out behind you!” I squinted up at flier number five. *Please do something else wrong*, I thought. *This is the only instruction I’m going to get.*

With some extra help from the coach on the platform, flier number five got his act together and was finally given the command to jump. I noted a three- or four-second delay between the command to jump and flier number five’s compliance. *No butt thrusting*, I instructed myself. *No hesitation when jumping. Try to be elegant for once.*

The instructions for dismounting the net were unclear, so I watched carefully while flier number five crawled over to the edge of the net, grabbed two pieces of rope, and somersaulted off to land on a squishy mat ten feet below.

“OK, where’s Janice?” called the blonde, erasing my name as she spoke. Watching me walk to the ladder, she was already shaking her head. “Take off those sunglasses and tie back that hair.” Complying with her orders gave me a moment to take stock of my nerves. So far, so good. My hands shook a bit, my heart beat a little fast, but my head was clear and I was up for this thing. The first order of business was to hook myself into a rope attached to a guy wire that ran parallel to the ladder. Similar to the safety tether in canyoneering, the rope would keep me from falling all the way to the ground if I were to fall off the ladder. I looked up. Here was hurdle number three: climbing the ladder to the platform. The first 23 feet were OK. The last step onto the tiny, exposed platform was a doozy.

So there I was. I’d imagined what the moment would be like. I wanted to be able to slow things down, to take a moment, before I jumped, to remember the twin towers and the way they used to define the skyline in Lower Manhattan. I wanted to offer a silent tribute to those people who jumped out of the burning towers with no net to catch them. I wanted to hear and feel everything, the whole riot of experience. In a way, I guess, I wanted to both immerse myself and to detach.

But once I got up there, adrenaline took over, focusing me only on the task at hand, which was to organize all I’d observed from the ground into some semblance of order. I knew that a protruding butt would result in a lecture from the coach below, but when

I leaned forward to grab for the trapeze bar, my body went into self-preservation mode and sure enough, my derriere stuck out. It suddenly had a mind of its own.

“Stop sticking out your butt!” yelled the ground coach. The coach on the platform reassured me it was safe to lean out. She was barely in her 20s, smaller in stature than the blonde below, and looked as if she weighed all of 90 pounds. “When you lean out,” she explained, “I’ll be holding your harness. You’ll feel like you’re going to fall but I won’t let you.”

“No offense,” I said, “but I weigh a fair bit more than you.”

“I’ve held football players,” she answered, “and *they* weigh *twice* what you do.” I sensed an insult in there somewhere, but I was at a disadvantage, distracted by an inability to convince my backside to follow orders. *Be elegant*, I remembered. With a deep, calming breath, I inched my toes over the edge of the platform and looked straight out at the trapeze bar. My left arm reached behind to hold onto a stabilizing rod, the posture exactly the same as receiving a baton in a relay race.

“Have you got me?” I asked the coach. “I’ve got you,” she said, and here came hurdle number four—releasing my death grip on the stabilizing rod while leaning out to reach for the trapeze bar. Now that it was in both hands, there was no turning back.

Hurdle number five was the hurdle itself. There I was, holding onto the trapeze bar with both hands, leaning out into nothing but the blue October sky, waiting for the command to jump and wondering, as each excruciating second ticked by, if I was actually going to be able to do it.

“Straighten your body a little more,” called the coach, “Tuck in that butt!” Leaning out at a 65-degree angle, I arched my

back and waited for what seemed like an eternity for the command to jump. *You will not hesitate*, I reminded myself. *You will be brave*.

“Hep!” he called, and I leaped off the platform before the sound had fully left his mouth. I was *flying!* The first arc was so wide my feet swung above my head and I noticed one tiny white cloud in an otherwise crystal clear sky. It was only later I realized that, while flying, I experienced a kind of blindness: oblivious to everything else, I saw only two things—the sapphire sky and the white trapeze bar. Nothing else, except for that little bunny-tail cloud. On the second arc of the swing, the ground coach told me to bring my legs up and over the bar to do a knee hang. I tried to channel my inner child, the one who used to play on the monkey bars, but I struggled and struggled and ultimately failed. “It’s OK,” he called. “When I tell you to drop, just let go and fall.”

Letting go—that would be hurdle number six.

Even as the arc of the swing diminished and I felt the full weight of my body ripping my arms out of their sockets, I couldn’t let go. “You’ll be fine,” called the ground coach, “just drop!” I was stuck. I hadn’t been afraid to jump, but I was terrified to let go of the bar and fall, even though I knew there was a net beneath me.

“Come on,” I heard flier number five call, “it’s really fun, you’ll see!”

They were going to have to do better than that to convince me to let go, but eventually, and soon, my hands and arms couldn’t bear it any longer. Within seconds I was on my back, bouncing up and down in the net. Flier number five was right. It was fun! I lay on my back for a moment to gaze at the perfect sky, closed my eyes, and felt the warmth of the fall sunshine, the breeze blowing off the harbor waters. I smiled and placed my hands on my stomach.

“All right,” the ground coach said, “crawl on over here. There are people waiting to fly.”

On hands and knees I made my wobbly way to the edge of the net. It was ten feet to the ground but looked higher and scarier than the trapeze platform. “Grab the ropes here and here,” explained the coach, showing me where to put my hands on the net, “then somersault off. I’ll spot you.” It was difficult, awkward, and it hurt my neck. Plus, it made me queasy.

“Work on your posture up there,” the coach told me. “Try to look more like this.” He struck the pose I should assume before the leap and I mimicked it, attempting to create a muscle memory that would follow me up the ladder to my next flight.

I got to swing three more times, and three more times I couldn’t manage the knee hang. Luis, one of the instructors, took pity on me and offered a private lesson on the low bar. The low bar is just that—you only have to stand on tiptoes to grab it, but it’s infinitely harder to work on than the flying trapeze. “I can’t do it, Luis,” I said, “I’m too old.”

Luis just smiled and asked me to try again. He didn’t speak very much English, but I’m sure he understood some of the epithets that were flying out of my mouth. I didn’t like this part at all. It was too difficult, and my mind started to wander. There I was hanging upside down, grunting, flailing my legs, while a man held my waist with two hands. *Oh my God, is my underwear exposed? Is my ancient leotard ripped in all the wrong places?* I’m sure Luis had seen and heard everything, but at that moment the unintended exposure of my buttocks suddenly became more of a crisis for me than getting my legs over the damned evil bar.

Eventually, with much effort and noise, I got my legs up and over and hung upside down for a while as Luis rested his warm hand on the small of my back. “Come up,” he said after a bit, requiring me to perform a single, herculean sit-up. This is where one would benefit from having really excellent abdominal muscles. I blame my difficulties on ten years of dedicated consumption of Girl Scout Thin Mints, which, apparently, had decided to take up permanent residence in my midsection. Nevertheless, Luis congratulated me and I followed him back up the ladder to try the leg hang in midair one more time.

While climbing the ladder for the fifth time, I felt a bolt of panic stab me in the heart. “What?” I said aloud, “*What?*” How could I have done this thing four times already and now suddenly be hemorrhaging from fear? It wasn’t the fear of failing—I really didn’t care if I managed the knee hang or not—it seemed as if that old *perceived* fear of heights had popped out of nowhere, like a leering jack-in-the-box. I shooed it away as best I could, but it kept skulking around in the shadows, mocking me. At the platform I took stock: my breathing was shallow and I couldn’t look down. Not a good sign. Luis unclipped one set of safety lines and attached me to another. The platform suddenly became twice as small. I grabbed one of his arms to steady myself. He smiled as he adjusted my harness.

With both his arms around me, I noticed the details of his face: brown eyes, long black eyelashes, a day’s worth of stubble, and a head full of dark, lush hair. I could feel the heat off his neck and smell his shampoo. It grounded me. I closed my eyes for a long time before I opened them again. He finished adjusting the harness and smiled but kept his hands on my hips. There was just the