

I Am a Parachute

A friend of mine lost his job recently.

That got me thinking about comfort and complacency, predictability and routine, the ways in which we favor that which we know, even that which we do not like very much, over that which is strange and uncertain. That is who we are. It's wired into our DNA and reinforced from infancy. Don't talk to strangers. Stick to what you know. There is comfort in routine, and, in fact, there is. Children love to hear the same stories over and over again, and every parenting expert in the world will tell you that if you want your child to sleep well – or if you yourself want to sleep well – follow the same nighttime routine and watch as baby (or you!) calmly drifts away on a comfy cloud bound for slumberland.

So we are not daredevils, which is perhaps why we so admire those people who are, the ones who seek opportunities to jump out of planes when most of us would rather know that we have a seat. In fact, most of us would rather know that we have the same seat on the same flight on the same airline on the same day of the week because doing what we know is always easier than doing something else.

And then you lose a job. Someone pushes you out of an airplane, and like it or not, choose it or not, daredevil or not, once you're out and the plane keeps flying you have no choice but to take the strange and uncertain, alarming and unwelcome trip down to the ground. But here's the thing: As long as you have a parachute, you have all the opportunity in the world to choose what type of trip down to the ground you are going to have. And so I reminded my friend that I am his parachute. I told him that he can go down screaming and fighting or he can choose to go down placidly, looking and listening, paying attention to everything there is to see and hear from his great vantage point in the sky. He can contemplate the ride in quietness and attentiveness so that by the time he gets back down to the earth he may have just learned a thing or two about himself, the world around him, and what his very first step should be once he is once again on terra firma.

There is a song that has had great meaning in my life. It is called *For a Dancer* and was written by Jackson Browne for a friend of his who died tragically in a fire. In it he says, "no matter how close to yours another's steps have grown, in the end there is one dance you'll do alone." There are many sorrowful dances we do in our lives. Luckily, for most of us, we do not do these alone. The people who love us – the ones who likewise suffer, in part because we do, in part because there is little they can do to help – become our parachutes. They hold us up and keep us aloft, they make the journey down softer and safer, they save us and give us hope. So if you happen to find yourself airborne and falling, look up, feel safe, and take the time you need to give yourself over to the possibilities inherent in the ride.