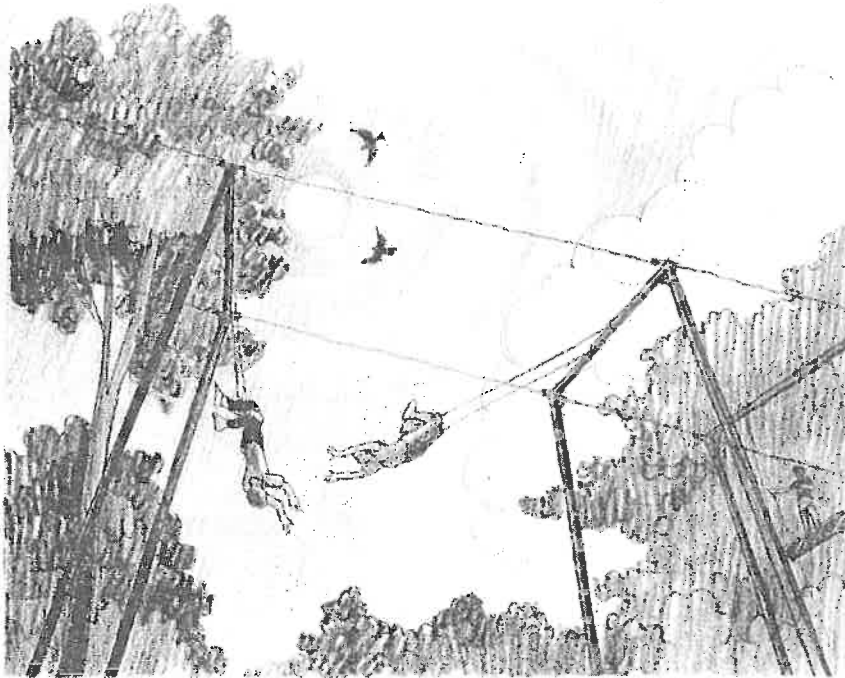


CHAPTER 10

*The Sonoma Trapeze Troupe*





*It is wonderful having to work for something and rely  
on other people as a team to do it. I end up flying  
with people with whom I wouldn't otherwise be associated  
and trusting them with my safety and my life.*

Masha Nordby

*One Saturday while* I was sitting on the bench awaiting my next turn on the trapeze, I was wishing out loud that I had my own trapeze rig so I didn't have to travel into San Francisco twice a week. Stephan Gaudreau, the chief trapeze instructor, overheard me and suggested that if I would get a dozen students in Sonoma he would install his portable rig on my farm and teach classes there. How could I refuse? After a month of bulldozing and landscaping we were ready for the new era to begin.

If you were to come unexpectedly on the freestanding trapeze rig in the woods just across from my writing studio, it might appear to be a giant creature from a prehistoric age or some kind of apparatus for reviving signals from outer space—antennas for communication with the beyond. It is, in fact, simply a machine that allows human beings to fly without benefit of wings and to fall from great heights without injury. By modern standards, it is an extremely primitive tool with few moving parts and no motors, but, considered mythologically, it is a remarkable, almost mystical, device—the opposite of the Procrustean bed. It stretches body and soul enough to allow human beings to soar momentarily, but it does not induce the hubris that makes them believe they can fly to the sun, like

Icarus on wax-and-feather wings, or ascend to the throne of God on angelic ones.

Four pairs of spindly legs (crane poles), each joined at the top by a crossbar, are arranged to form a rectangular cube sixty-five feet long, thirty-one feet high, and twelve feet across that is held together and anchored to the ground by a dozen or more steel cables.

Next to the first crane, a narrow ladder leads up to what is variously called the platform, the pedestal, or the board, six feet long by eighteen inches wide, from which the flyers initiate their midair choreography. In back of the board hangs a ten-foot pole (the noodle), with a hook on the end that is used to retrieve the flyer's trapeze that hangs from twelve-foot steel cables from the second crane bar. The catcher's trapeze (the catch bar or catch trap) is hung from eight-foot cables from the third crane bar. Beside it hangs a thick rope the catcher climbs to reach his perch.

In the indoor arena in San Francisco, as in the circus, the platform and trapezes are hung from the ceiling rather than from freestanding crane bars; but the dimensions of the rig remain, essentially, the same.

Beneath the entire rig, a gauze-like net made of nylon forms an artificial floor eight feet above the actual floor and extends upward to form walls (aprons) on either end that close off the space behind the platform and behind the catcher to prevent injury should a flyer overshoot the mark in returning to the platform or be dropped by the catcher.

There is one further device, a set of safety lines (the "mechanic"), which is held by a trainer and connected to a safety belt, that allows a novice or an accomplished flyer to work on tricks without the risk of a bad fall to the net.

This simple superstructure with its steel bones and rope sinews forms the airy walls that contain the world of trapeze. Like a baseball diamond, a football field, a law court, or a ballet

theater, it is a self-defined realm of meaning that has its own laws, its own language, its own history and traditions, and its own heroes. It is a playground, a field of dreams, a place of adventure for body, mind, and spirit, but its magic begins with ordinary stuff—pipes and cable and nylon.

*Having a trapeze rig* outside my studio door changed the entire nature of my practice. Any time I got tired of writing, I could cross the bridge to the playground. I knew it wasn't smart to practice by myself, but when it was late afternoon and the wind was rustling the leaves of the maples, I couldn't help slipping into the woods and swinging on the grapevines.

My advertisements in a local newspaper collected a dozen interested neophytes and created an instant trapeze school with the instructors from the San Francisco school teaching regular Wednesday and Sunday classes. Within a few months, a hard core of enthusiastic flyers gathered and we christened ourselves the Sonoma Trapeze Troupe and began to practice together several times a week. As in any community, we had a natural diversity of talents and timidities, and since we perfected different skills and learned different tricks, we became teachers to one another. I was the first to perfect the back-end uprise, which I taught to David who, in turn, taught me some fancy falls he had mastered. Occasionally, we had an official teacher, but increasingly we critiqued each other's moves and tricks, encouraged each other, and figured things out by trial and error. We collected and watched videos of great flyers and studied their techniques. We videoed and analyzed our practice sessions. The more we began to trust in the efficacy of our shared ignorance and wisdom, the more we each became "master" and "student." Unlike most spiritual communities, we killed the guru and learned by sharing our gifts with each other.

Practice gradually moved away from being a special event and became an integral part of our daily lives. As I followed a regular routine of stretching and warming up, the chronic pains in my arms and shoulders disappeared. Hanging and swinging on the trapeze became so comfortable that I felt out of sorts if I was deprived of it for a few days.

Climbing the ladder and standing on the board became no more fearful than standing on the ground, in large measure because our amateur troupe changed one of the sacred traditions of the tribe. For reasons that are obscure, the orthodox pedestal board is a twelve-inch sliver hung over an abyss and must accommodate three people, one or two of whom are in a constant process of taking off, landing, dropping return bars, and bowing to the audience. As all the members of our small troupe were in the early stages of mastering the basic turn-arounds and returns to the board, our efforts resembled nothing so much as adolescent buzzards trying to land on a twig. So we broke with tradition and made a thirty-six-inch-wide board on which four or five of us could congregate, encourage each other, and rescue our fellow flyers whose approach to the landing strip was either too short or too long. At first, our teachers railed and ridiculed our innovation. They sneered, "The board is no place for comfort, or parties," and predicted that people would grow complacent and fall because the landing pad was too large. But, in time, the defenders of the old order embraced the novelty, especially after Tony Steele, who happened to be visiting one weekend, dignified our heresy by announcing to the congregation that he and his catcher Billy Woods once built a six-foot board that accommodated a sofa and an ice chest so they could stay up there all day.

Much of what our troupe practiced and learned that first year were the intangibles—flexibility, rhythm, and timing—rather than tricks.

*Because I am lanky* and male I had a problem with flexibility and rhythm. Had you watched me dance you would have seen that, like most plain vanilla men, I tended to be stiff through the middle and to compensate by a flurry of arm and leg motion. My momentum came more from my extremities than my center, a pattern that limited my flexibility and power in almost all the moves required for trapeze. A good flyer needs hips like Elvis and a spine like a black-snake whip. I, unfortunately, had the hips and spine of Gary Cooper in *High Noon* or Clint Eastwood in *Hang 'Em High*. No bend, no swing, no sway. It doesn't mean a thing if you ain't got that swing. I had no way to generate the lift and power necessary to propel myself into any of the big tricks. In both my swing and my break, my body was so unbending that I had virtually no back kick and therefore could not drive myself upward. To gain power I needed to extend the pendulum on both ends, to stretch back and reach forward.

Naturally (or rather, unnaturally), at first I tried to force myself to be more flexible. Bend, damn it, bend! When that didn't work, I began the not unpleasant discipline of studying the hips of our most lithe and lovely female flyer. For reasons having everything to do with gender, women tend to be more flexible than men and to move naturally from their center, from what the martial arts call the *kath* or *hara*. Gradually, ever so gradually, I learned to bend and lead with my hips, to move in a more powerful and womanly way.

With this increase in flexibility I began to get into the rhythm. As my swing lengthened, I felt the still point at the top, relaxed into the glide downward, and backed up with a snap. Instead of trying to power myself, I rode the pendulum, and let gravity do the work.

It is passing strange and marvelous: when you stop fighting gravity you discover grace. When I finally got the force out and the swing just right, there was a moment when I seemed to pass from an ordinary rate of motion into warp-speed. The momentum of the pendulum took over, effort gave way to grace, and the feeling I had was like the representation in *Star Wars* when the ship goes into hyperspace. Grace seems to be a kind of hypermotion in which we break through into another dimension. The fourth dimension?

I offer one bit of empirical evidence to substantiate my feeling that there has been a fundamental change in the rhythm of my being. A few months ago my wife and I were invited to a black-tie dinner and dance. I had accepted with reluctance and was surprised to notice that I was actually enjoying the occasion enormously. Late in the evening, full into the boogie, my wife looked at me quizzically and asked, "When did you learn to dance like that?"

*The new rig* was changing everything because, as George Bernard Shaw said about marriage, "it combined the maximum of temptation with the maximum of opportunity." As I began to practice more frequently, however, I found I was suffering from mood swings. September 11 was a perfect Indian summer day, and I was bright and energetic as a squirrel collecting acorns for winter. I sprinted up the ladder, tried new tricks, soared high and strong as if my chest were a helium balloon and my arms were stainless steel cables. September 12 was also a perfect Indian summer day, but I was down, dull, and depressed. No matter how hard I tried, there was no lift in my swing, no snap in my turns, no singing in my muscles. It may or may not be true, as William Blake said, that "the path of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" but on the trapeze it



leads to fatigue, mistakes, and folly. A better guide is Aristotle who counseled the golden mean—balance and moderation.

I needed to learn to curtail my endless desire and accept the rhythm of my days. Like the prophets of the Dow, I dream of new daily highs and endless progress without depression or inflation. Young men, like stockbrokers, hope against all evidence that what goes up will stay up.

But the seasons of mind and body change, and there are days when I walk and faint, run and am weary, and am unable to rise up on the wings of eagles.

Gradually I cobbled together a rough barometer to help me assess my daily condition. Each day I monitor the rise and fall of several variables—the *umph* factor, the *verve* factor, the *will* factor, and the *grace* factor—to get a rough idea of how my soul-weather is changing. The interplay of these factors like atmospheric highs and lows and offshore winds governs the climate of the day.

*The umph factor*, the amount of raw energy I have on any given day, varies according to how much I had to eat and drink the night before, how much sleep I have had, how much I have exhausted myself by too much travel, work, or trapeze practice, and with the mysterious variation of seasonal rhythms. For me February, not April, is the cruelest month. Midwinter is the low ebb when the surplus energy I stored from summer and fall is depleted and I can only await the returning spring. Add to this the monthly fluctuation of biorhythms. Men do not, ordinarily, menstruate but something that is a kissing cousin to PMS strikes us—moods, minidepressions, unexplained energy crises, and (gasp) impotence.

The *verve* factor is the amount of nerve and courage I have on any given day. There are days when I find it easy to take

reasonable risks, to experiment with tricks that are just beyond the edge of my competency. There are other days when somebody pulls the plug, the water starts to circle the drain, and I lose my nerve. The doldrums, a downdraft, a sinking of spirit. No *élan vital*. It is all too much. Why bother?

This condition has been called by many names: the Greeks labeled it melancholy; the Christians called it *acedia* and described it as the demon that walks at midday; the French philosopher Blaise Pascal called it *ennui* and thought it was the main symptom of a godless life; German philosophers described it as world-weariness; the English called it boredom and considered it the French disease. Once, it was simply the blues and it came from being on a lonesome road a long way from home. Lately, we have stripped it of spiritual significance, renamed it "depression" and promised to cure it with pills.

Whatever you call it, this demon lurks in the shadows ready to strike if I move too fast, work too much, or live without passion.

Alfredo Cadona called it "casting—the demon of the circus tent" and held it responsible for the death of many performers.

*Casting, to the circus performer, is a purely psychological term. It has to do with that part of an instant when the mind seems to let go; to refuse longer to hold to the terrific burden of concentration which has been placed upon it. It is like a sharp knife struck suddenly against a set of tightly drawn strings; the parting comes in a dozen directions; the performer sprawls hopelessly, all thought of his trick departed. . . . Sometimes it arrives like an epidemic. One year six women fell. . . . "I just let go. I couldn't hold any longer." This is the invisible demon of the circus tent. It is always present, working through gravitation, through a headache. Sometimes it comes more into the open; it almost visualizes itself into a personality. (Saturday Evening Post, December 6, 1930)*

When Ringling Brothers came to town in 1997, I talked to Luis Cabellero of the Flying Caballeros. I had seen him miss the quad in three successive performances and I wondered how that made him feel. He told me, "Some days I feel invincible in the air and other days I don't want to do it. Sometimes you float in the air, you are weightless. Other times you weigh tons and you fall like lead. Sometimes I feel like an angel is holding me and as soon as Ruben [the catcher] appears, the angel lets me go and he catches me."

I have learned to detect the distant early warning signs of the approach of the noon-tide demon. It begins with fantasies of curling up by the fire with a cup of tea, and I find myself singing, "All I want is a room somewhere . . ." Next, I try to pump up my willpower. When this doesn't work and if I persist in my efforts, I make dumb mistakes and lose a few inches of skin from bad landings in the net. Finally it occurs to me that, maybe, it is time to go to ground for a while.

The best thing I can do when I lose my verve is surrender and walk away from the edge for a time. Give up. Stop striving. Do nothing. Enjoy simple pleasures. That is a difficult lesson for an all-American male, because we have had it drilled into us that willpower conquers all. We believe: God helps those who help themselves; when the going gets tough the tough get going; we can do anything we set our minds to—and all the other clichés that are the bread and butter of inspirational speakers. Instead of court jesters, our boardrooms, locker rooms, and professional conventions always have a motivational cheerleader who promotes the magic of willpower. Even genius, we are told, is 10 percent inspiration and 90 percent perspiration.

This is indeed half-true. Clearly, nothing heroic can be accomplished without intention, determination, and willpower.

Alfredo Cadona came to the moment when only an extraordinary commitment offered any promise of a breakthrough. "The long and fatalistic history of the triple deterred

me from its accomplishment for years. Then in 1919, I determined either to accomplish it, get killed, or quit trying. So with that out of the way, my mind cleared itself of extraneous matters and exerted itself fully upon the concentration necessary to accomplish the feat. The next spring I went into performance with the triple somersault as a climax of my regular routine."

It should be equally clear, however, that there are many things that cannot be accomplished by willpower. Friedrich Nietzsche, whose *Will to Power* is one of the great hymns to the kingdom and glory of power, nevertheless let slip the startling observation that "when politics swallows up all serious concern for real spiritual matters . . . power makes stupid." This insight, which we are loath to admit, is a humiliating truth. Witness the megastupidities of the twentieth century that were born from the arrogance of power: Hitler's overweening ambitions; Stalin's purge of his greatest generals, the nuclear arms race between the great "superpowers," Pol Pot's "idealistic" genocide of the Cambodian people. Have there ever been more stupid wastes of human lives?

It is equally true on a personal level. We fall into great physical and spiritual danger when we attempt to govern our lives by the single ideal of power. Continuous effort exhausts both the body and the spirit. When I try obsessively to accomplish something, and double my efforts with every failure, I eventually discover that some lurking doubt is canceling out my effort. When I must exert an enormous amount of willpower, I come up against a resisting won't-power.

There is a time for conquest and a time for yielding. You have to know when to swim upstream and when to float with the current, when "to hold them and when to fold them." I have to keep constantly alert to resist that most American of all spiritual temptations, the temptation to make "I can" into an icon. Sometimes I can't. I cannot will myself to love someone,

to have an erection, to go to sleep, to be creative, or to be graceful.

Once I accept my limitations, however, amazing things happen. The other day our troupe was practicing. I was a limp noodle, lackadaisical; no power in my swing, force out, or kick back. My set was low, my break lazy, I let go of the bar too early, and I tucked when I should have opened. Climbing the ladder for another try, I gave myself a pep talk at about the same time I heard my teacher shout, "Do everything with more amplitude. Commit." My next attempt was even worse.

Finally, I took a break and tried to puzzle out what was happening. Allowing my thoughts and feelings to rise into awareness, I realized that a mood of timidity had invaded my entire body. I have a visceral deficiency of courage. My timing was off. My spirit was suffering from jet lag. My mind faxed a clear set of directions but my body was in another time zone. Noumph. No verve. No grace.

I had no sooner accepted that it was going to be one of those "no guts no glory" days when I remembered that before leaving the sanctuary of my bed that morning I had a brief dream in which I was practicing the backward somersault to the net—something I had not yet done without safety lines. It occurred to me that, maybe, I should practice falling.

I climbed to the pedestal, grabbed the bar, took off and allowed my swing to die down a little. Then, I kicked forward-back-forward, brought my knees to my chest, tucked and . . . Nothing. I couldn't bring myself to release the bar and fall to the net. Donna, one of my fellow fledgling flyers, volunteered to show me the trick—without the final release. But at the last moment she let go of the bar and completed the trick—her first time. Everybody cheered. I ascended again and went through all the preliminary motions, except this time when the moment for commitment came, I rolled backward, let go of the bar, and landed perfectly in the net. I had done the trick for

the first time. More cheers. Next, fifteen-year-old Jaharla decided to try it. She succeeded on her first attempt. And we all cheered. Somehow, we had encouraged each other to do a new thing. We spent the rest of the afternoon falling, again and again, laughing, and being very pleased with ourselves.

There are two morals to this story. The first: if you can't rise to the occasion, you can always practice falling. The second: courage is a by-product of communion rather than an individual virtue, the creation of a compassionate community rather than a psychological quality some people have and others lack.

Blessedly, there are moments when verve and nerve are strong and I rise, effortlessly, to the occasion. For over a year I had been timidly contemplating the rear mount, a move that requires the flyer to return blindly to the pedestal—in a backward position. Time after time, I tried to release my left hand from the safety of the trapeze and make that precarious grasp of the upright that supports the pedestal, which would ensure a safe landing. But I couldn't force myself to do it. With each failure of nerve I badgered myself with a minilecture—"Just do it!"—until I was so discouraged I ceased even to attempt the move to save myself from yet another failure. Then, one day, the wind of the spirit blew from the void and whistled through my bones, and without trying or having to work to overcome inner resistance, I simply did the back mount. And I did it again, and again, until it was securely stashed in my bag of tricks.

The grace factor is the most elusive of the variables that govern my day. Grace, like love, is something into or out of which we sometimes fall. Many of our best moments and creations are accidental, "found art," serendipitous occurrences. I remember a cold, drizzly, February afternoon forty years ago when my mood was grayer than the day and I looked up and saw a red smile on the face of a black woman—a scarlet tanager in the heart of winter—and my spirit soared.

*From time to time* I enter the zone of grace. Recently I was practicing the plange, catch, and return. Each of my moves was strong, but awkward, as if I had pasted together static postures to form a series. Had you filmed my action it would have appeared jerky like an oldtime movie. Then, suddenly, my body seemed to lengthen and relax. Time became elastic and I broke through some invisible barrier and did three perfect returns from the catcher to the fly bar. "Perfect," I say, not because they were artistically elegant but because they were accomplished skillfully rather than by grit and good luck. I grasped the wrists of the catcher, forced out as we rose to the apex of the arch, kicked back hard during the downswing, waited until we reached the apex of the return arc, pushed, turned in midair and grasped the bar. No! I didn't "grasp" the bar. It appeared and I "accepted" it. Every move just happened; the pieces came together in one harmonious movement and the whole was greater than the sum of the parts.

Unaccountably, there are moments and days when I simply possess an effortless sense of visceral authority. I do not have to exert willpower, so there is no contradictory won't-power, no determination, no set jaw. There is only a total commitment to being in motion. When it happens it is always a surprise.

Moving gracefully, there is no longer any separation between the actor, the act, and the action. The old religious notion of grace refers to times like these when everything comes together effortlessly, and we are whole. In these rare moments when I am myself without having to try, I am at peace with the people I love, with the work that is my vocation, with the place and pleasures I inhabit, with the small tricks I am trying to master.

Grace Happens.