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My Dear Son Max,

In 1953, shortly after my 23rd birthday, I went to parachute school, conducted by the 82nd Airborne Division at Ft. Benning, GA. I was in the 4602nd Air Intelligence Service Squadron. Our mission was to interrogate Russian airmen, who were shot down over any of the northern tier of states and captured by local law enforcement authorities. No, they never came, but that was not my fault.

The idea was that the next war, a nuclear war, would not last very long. There wouldn't be time for prisoners to be transported to an interrogation center. Our job was to interrogate prisoners wherever they were taken into custody, and to do so in not more than six hours. I was stationed at Selfridge Air Force Base in Mt. Clemens, Michigan. My unit had to be anywhere in Michigan within only three hours after learning that a Russian airman was in custody. Our squadron commander, (full) Colonel White was not a pilot, and so by Air Force regulations, he could not command pilots. For that reason, we could have no aircraft of our own, and that led to the Colonel's decision that we would get to our quarry by parachuting into the locale. So, I was on my way to Ft. Benning, GA, to do my duty.

Of course, the events leading up to my decision to go to jump school were not so simple. This story starts when I was about nine years old. In Chicago, where I was born and where I lived until I joined the Air Force, the city had added an indoor swimming pool to water pumping stations built in the Thirties. On a winter's day, I decided to go swimming at just such a water station near my home. Once there, I practiced swan dives from the high diving board. On one dive, I looked down and saw two kids in a race, and it seemed that I would land right on top of them. Time stretched out -- a reality, not just a colorful phrase. Of course, I was too young to recognize this as a symptom of great fear.

As it happened, I only touched the foot of one of the swimmers. As I had made many dives that day, I decided that it was a good time to go home.

At about the same time the following year, I decided once again to go swimming and to practice my swan diving technique. I climbed the ladder, stepped onto the platform, and immediately turned to stone. It was all I could do to back up and climb back down the ladder. From that day to this, I have had a truly phobic fear of heights. In a moment, I became acrophobic. To appreciate the power of a phobia, you should know that when I'm watching a story (not the news) on television, and someone is out on a ledge, the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet sweat. That's not something anyone can do on purpose.

Knowing the tale of the high diving board, it should not be hard to imagine my state of mind the day Colonel White came back from a trip to the Pentagon and announced that we would all become parachutists. Parachuting was (and still is, I guess) a hazardous duty, and as such, no one could order a person to go; one had to volunteer. Given my acrophobia, I had no intention of doing so.

After the meeting, in the hall, Colonel White put his arm around my shoulders and said, "Well, Ted, are you going to parachute school?" Before I tell you what happened next, it may help to tell how it is that I had become a favorite of the Colonel's, which explains both the gesture of putting his arm around my shoulders and what he expected of me.

That part of the story starts right after I got out of basic training. I was temporarily stationed at Brooks Air Force Base. There I learned all English grammar in six weeks, in preparation for learning Russian. One day, while sitting in the barracks minding my own business, a sergeant came by and required all of us to march over to the squadron HQ building. There the Squadron Commander explained that he had walked through our barracks just a short while ago, and no one called the barracks to attention. Therefore, he said, you are busted one rank. In my case, that meant from PFC, a reward for finishing Basic Training, back to buck private, a rank bestowed as a reward for joining up. I didn't remember seeing the guy walk through the barracks, no matter how hard I tried. Then I realized that that must have been at just the time I was in the latrine, relaxing on the potty. I didn't believe the Squadron Commander was the kind of guy who would credit that story, especially as he had just violated the strict prohibition against meting out mass punishment, found in the Universal Code of Military Justice. So, I lumped it.

Shortly after, I was shipped to the Army Language School in Monterey, CA. There I got my one stripe back quickly. At graduation, it was the custom to promote all attendees by one rank. That meant I would make Corporal at the same time as my cohort. But that was not to be. That month the Air Force decided to make those promotions every two months, instead of monthly. As the date of my PFC stripe was later than the others, I was not included in that month, and I was no longer there the following month. The others made Corporal. I left the Army Language School a lowly PFC.

Back at Brooks Air Force Base, one day there was a notice on the bulletin board, directing all persons, who had been PFC's since a certain date and had not yet gotten their second stripe, to apply for it at the Orderly Room. I went, filled out the application, and used the date I made PFC the first time, as the second date was not eligible for such largesse. Once the other poor schnooks saw I had a second stripe, they went running to the Duty Sergeant, asking why they had not also gotten a second stripe. That exposed what I had done, but the Duty Sergeant was kind enough to let it ride, so I did not finish my time there in the stockade. (You may be amused to learn that the Duty Sergeant was a guy who flunked out of learning English grammar and became a runner in the orderly room.)

That was when I shipped out for the HQ of the 4602nd AISS. One day, there were a number of promotions from Corporal to Sergeant in our outfit, but not enough to promote everyone eligible. The Colonel, a fair man, conducted interviews to select the most deserving. When my turn came, I entered a room where the Colonel and the Adjutant were sitting on one side of a table. I was asked to sit across from them. One of the questions the Colonel asked was, "When inspecting a downed Russian aircraft, what

would you look for." I named many of the right things, and then I added, "chemical or biological weapons." Well, that answer was not on the approved list. The Colonel asked, "Why would you look for that." I could tell from the evil glint in his eye that I was suddenly in trouble. I answered, "Well, if those weapons *were* on the aircraft, you would want to know, wouldn't you?" I was one of the lucky ones to be promoted to Sergeant. Afterwards the Colonel said to me that better than knowing the right answers was being quick in a pinch. That's how I got to be one of Colonel White's favorites.

And that's why he put his arm around my shoulders when he asked, "Well, Ted, are you going to jump school?" I had my hands in my pockets on the theory that I would be less likely to raise my hand, if I had a good grip on my testicles. Without thinking, I stopped dead in my tracks and blurted, "You must be crazy!" As I seemed in that moment to be no longer quick in a pinch, I also ceased being one of the Colonel's favorites.

After that incident, two years went by. I didn't go to jump school and I didn't see another promotion. The Colonel hadn't gone to jump school either, which I thought rather cowardly, since most of the men had already gone. One day, though, before I went, the Colonel did go to jump school. He was fat and forty. He got the doctor to administer Novocain, or some such, in his lower back, so he could endure the demands of training.

The first week of training focused on the 35-foot tower, which was used to learn the correct technique for jumping from the door of an aircraft. After jumping from the tower, wearing a harness that was attached to an overhead cable, the trainee glided down to a small mound, where he was caught and disconnected from the harness. Colonel White could not feel his legs, so he came into the mound with one leg straight out in front of him. He shattered that leg in three places, an injury called a *telescope fracture*, I think. In the first hours that the Colonel was in the hospital, the Adjutant took command of the squadron – and promoted me from Buck Sergeant to Staff Sergeant! The very next morning, Colonel White resumed command from his hospital bed. Talk about a window of opportunity!

After that gesture by the Adjutant and with all other members of our little unit in Michigan already graduated from jump school, although I had but eight months of service to go, I said, "I will go to jump school." Everyone was surprised, but no one more so than I. Within two months, in early September, I was on my way to Ft. Benning.

I arrived there on a Wednesday. Training didn't start until the following Monday. All new arrivals had to demonstrate that they were fit for training by passing a test set of activities or fall out each day for additional preparation. Fortunately, I had quit smoking just as soon as I made the decision to go and from then on had been running daily the prescribed three sets of eight minutes running, followed by two minutes walking. Even so, Georgia is hot that time of year. You have no idea how hot, unless you have been there, or somewhere else closer to the equator. As I ran that day, my brain felt like eggs frying over a high flame. I passed, and spent most of time until Monday, lying on the springs of my bunk to get maximum circulation of air around my body.

I was at parachute school in Ft. Benning, but I still had my acrophobia to face. In addition to running, overhand pull-ups, frequent punishments of "give me ten," meaning pushups, and exiting from a mock aircraft door at ground level, the principal training device was the 35-foot tower, already described.

The way to the 35-foot platform was in single file up a winding staircase. On the way up, I was surprised to see guys, whom I would be afraid to meet in a non-Jewish neighborhood in Chicago, on their way down. They couldn't hack the tower and were un-volunteering. I wondered what I would do.

What I did was, I never looked down. The process was: Get into the harness that was attached to the overhead wire. Then do as commanded, "Stand in the door," as taught. Shout out your name and number to the people below who were judging your jump. In my case, I looked at the sky above and not the judges below, and screamed in my loudest voice, "Theodore Dunn, AF16372401. Then exit on the command, "Go." That was the very command we would hear on actual jumps. We needed to complete two exits from the tower that were judged to be adequate to continue in jump school. Mercifully, I did so on my first two tries.

As a Sergeant, I was entitled to occupy a room at the end of a barracks, rather than a bunk in the open bays that held some 60 troops on two floors. Four Sergeants occupied the room. The other three were black. One of them was Stanley Drayton. Stanley had lost in the title bout for Champion of the First (Third?) Army. Stanley was so strong that after a day's training, in the shower, he would leap up on the cold-water pipe and knock off 25 overhand pull-ups. Seven overhand pull-ups were required. Some guys couldn't even do that.

One Saturday night I was in bed, when Stanley and the other two occupants of the room came back from a night in town. I don't know why, but before going to sleep, Stanley beat up both of them.

The reason I'm telling you about Stanley Drayton is this. The motto of the 82nd Airborne is "Leadership." That means, simply, that the highest rank goes first. Every queue was organized first by rank, then alphabetically within rank. That custom meant that Stanley was always the man immediately in front of me for all training activities. I'll tell you more about Stanley when we get up in the plane for the first time.

In the second week of training, the three-hundred-foot tower is the principal training device. You've seen this kind of device in Coney Island, or in pictures of Coney Island. The differences are: In Coney Island, you come down on guide wires; in Ft, Benning, you float free. In Coney Island, all four sides of the tower are used; in jump training, only three, depending upon the direction of the wind. I can't really recall now, but in Coney Island, I believe you sit in a kind of chair. In jump school, it works like this. You are strapped into a harness just like a parachute harness. The parachute it is depended

from is already fully open and clipped to a metal ring. By means of that ring, you are hoisted to the top of the tower. Once there, the parachute is released, and you float free. The purpose of the device is to learn how to do a proper parachute landing fall, a PLF, as it is known in the trade. As with aircraft, how you land is an important part of the ride.

I thought for sure that I would panic, being hoisted 300 feet skyward. To my surprise, I was less affected than on the 35-foot tower. That's when I learned, or at least surmised, that acrophobiacs are not afraid of falling. They are afraid of jumping! If high up, but with no way to jump, as on an airplane or an enclosed terrace, they (we, I) experience no fear.

The 300-foot tower was a relief and quite a fun ride. I qualified there, too, although in this case, I wish I had had more such "jumps."

That brings us to the Friday before the third week, the week in which five jumps, one a day, from an aircraft in flight (fright?) take place. On that afternoon, we were herded into a large room, where we were told about possible parachute malfunctions. They were:

> The Streamer. The 'chute doesn't open, but streams above you, as you plunge to earth.
>
> The Mae West. One of the risers goes over the middle of the 'chute, causing the canopy to resemble a brassiere. The air escapes rapidly from the raised edges, threatening a landing that is realized entirely too soon.
>
> The Cigarette Roll. One panel of the 'chute just rolls up, leaving a gaping hole in the canopy, which loses quite a lot of lift, indeed.

The sovereign remedy for all these malfunctions was activation of the reserve 'chute, which sits across your belly with a ripcord easily at hand – if you're right-handed. We were cautioned, as follows: If you are not falling fast enough (though maybe fast enough to get killed), the reserve 'chute, instead of going up and unfurling, may fall to your boots and get tangled in the shoe laces. The best advice they could offer in that event was, try shaking it free. Of course, to know if you had any of these malfunctions, it was essential to look up at the canopy the moment the 'chute opened, a feat easier said than done, as you will see.

The final presentation in that meeting was the commander of the parachute school, a ramrod graduate of West Point. He spoke to us about the joys of jumping. He told us that the chance of a fatality was "one in a thousand." There were two hundred in that class about to make five jumps each. Do the arithmetic; someone is sure to die next week! He capped his presentation by handing out pamphlets extolling the virtues and uses of Jesus Christ, which he elaborated on in his own words.

Now you are ready to hear the lesson in the previous paragraph. As the ranking member, he was the first to jump from the first plane. Leadership, you may recall. My research showed that on my plane and on every other plane, many, possibly more than half, were vomiting on the way up to and out the door. On his plane, no one vomited. The meaning and value of Leadership, real Leadership in any form, was demonstrated to me that day.

We had a weekend in which to be proud of having gotten this far. In the barracks there was a very short guy from West Virginia. Most short people would put their pillow at the head of the bunk, where everyone else puts their pillow, and their feet would end somewhat short of the foot of the bed. Not him. He put his pillow near in the middle of the bunk, so that his feet ended right at the foot of the bunk. He looked ridiculous. I said to myself, "If he makes it, I'll make it." Sure enough, we were both there to the end, while many a tough guy washed out.

We had the weekend also to ponder the jumps ahead of us on Monday. The nastiest of our training Sergeants was a guy named Koslowsky (no kidding). When he was near you, you always got extra "give me ten." On that Sunday, though, he was sweet and friendly, because the training was over, or so we thought. He held us enraptured by the story of the 82nd Airborne's beloved pet monkey that they had while stationed in Japan. One day, they had a tailor make a parachute for the monkey, a 'chute in every respect like the ones the guys used, only smaller to fit the monkey. The great day came. They jumped in a training exercise, and so did the monkey. The 'chute opened as it was supposed to do, just like their own. The monkey looked up, as if to check his canopy, then climbed up the risers, causing the 'chute to collapse, and naturally sending the poor monkey to a speedy death at a terminal velocity of 120 miles an hour. Of course, it was then quite clear that Koslowsky, the sadist, got his greatest pleasure from telling this same story to each successive class of jumpers on the Sunday before their first jump.

The conversation did lead to some useful information. We asked Koslowsky, "What happens when a person freezes in the door? Do you push him out of the aircraft?" He explained that when a person freezes in the door, his body is as rigid as steel, a sort of catatonic effect. The Jumpmaster and helpers have all they can do just to pry the guy's fingers loose, so they can get him back to his seat. We were all comforted by that answer.

Monday came, as it always does, no matter what, for those who continue living. We picked up real parachutes for the first time, got into the harness, and inserted the détente clip into the quick release button (I forget what it is really called). Then we waited, silently. If Stanley had not been black, I swear he would have been white as a sheet at that moment, or even whiter, like me.

After a while, we marched, in rank and alphabetical order, in a single file into C130's (forget this, too), called the boxcar, owing to the shape of the fuselage. Two booms, extending backward from the wings on either side of the "boxcar," supported the tail. Inside we sat in two rows on opposite sides of the aircraft between the pilot's cabin and

the open doors, one on each side of the plane at the back. The highest-ranking persons, with names highest in alphabetical order, sat nearest the door and were to be the first men out on each side.

We had been drilled in the seven commands that would get us from our seats and out the door of the aircraft. They were (and probably still are):

Lean forward. The only way to get up with a parachute on your back.

Stand up.

Hook up. Military jumping is static line jumping. There is a cable, called the static line because it stays in the plane, running the length of the plane near the ceiling. The parachute has, at one end of a strap, a clasp for the purpose of hooking it onto the cable. The other end of the strap is connected by three turns of number five string to the bridal loop, at the top of the parachute, where all the risers meet. After you jump, as you fall, the strap attached to the static line pulls the parachute from its pack. When the strap is fully extended the string breaks. The strap stays attached to the static line in the plane. The parachute, which is now streaming above you, in a plume like a white feather, has a channel (if it is packed right), whereby air enters and opens your parachute.

Check your equipment. Each person checks the parachute of the man in front of him; then all do an about face and check the equipment of the person now in front, finally they do another about face to face the door of the aircraft.

Shuffle down. Keeping the inside foot always in front of the outside foot, all the jumpers shuffle towards the door with the first man stopping just at the near edge of door.

Stand in the door. The first jumper stands in the door in just the way he learned on the 35-foot tower.

Go! The command is accompanied by a firm slap on the jumper's ass. The first jumper exits the aircraft -- in the approved fashion, if he knows what's good for him. The next man in line immediately stands in the door, commanded to do so by the same command that sent the man in front of him out the door.

For each jumper, the Jumpmaster repeats, **Go! Go! . . . Go!** And triggers each man with a slap on the ass, just in case one needs more than a single word of encouragement, until the entire "stick" has left the aircraft.

So there we are, sitting in our seats as the plane starts to take off. Stanley can't handle the pressure. He is bouncing up and down. I'm afraid he will screw up something on my parachute. I don't know what, but something. Finally, I can't take it anymore. In my crabbiest voice is say to Stanley, "For Christ's sake, Stanley, sit still!" Stanley sits still, like I was the runner up for boxing champion of the First Army and he is a formerly skinny, Jewish kid.

The time came to make the jump. I was fine for the first four commands. At the command, **Shuffle down**, my autonomic nervous system began shutting down vital systems, in a vain attempt to leave the aircraft by other means. First, my knees turned to water – not literally, of course, or I would have fallen, but that's what it felt like. As I shuffled towards the door, I lost sight and hearing. My eyes had dilated to the max. All I could see was a fuzzy white area that was the open door; all else was gone. I assume the reason I lost hearing was from the rise in blood pressure. I couldn't even hear the noise of the engines. All I could hear was an internal hum. So, by the time it was my turn to stand in the door, I was blind, deaf, and feeling lame. And there was more to come. On command, I stood in the door and jumped.

We were using parachutes that took three and a half seconds to open. We were trained to count, "One thousand. Two thousand. Three thousand." If we got to four thousand, we were in trouble. Even after the parachute opened, there was still some danger from the malfunctions described earlier. Our instructions, you remember, were to look up to check the canopy. From the moment I left the aircraft, until the moment my parachute opened, I was unconscious. I did not count, couldn't. If my parachute had not opened, neither of us would be here today. Likewise, I didn't remember to look up to check for a malfunction.

Once my parachute opened, I was ecstatic, as you may well imagine. There I was, possibly one thousand feet above the earth, floating weightlessly. (Your descent offsets your weight.) What a view! It takes a minute or longer (I forget) to hit the ground and I enjoyed every moment. The drop zone had been plowed to a fine Georgia dust, so the landing surface was cushy. Back on earth, the first words in my mind and out of my mouth were, "Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonoi Elohenu, Adonoi Echod." That is quite a statement from someone, who had, and still has, absolutely no use for religious mumbo jumbo.

On the way back to the barracks, I noticed that every single person on the bus was talking, and not one person was listening, including me.

I made eleven jumps in all: seven in Jump School, five to qualify as parachutist (one with a sixty-pound pack and an M16 rifle; another at night -- elegant and magical.), two more to qualify as a Jumpmaster (a treat for all sergeants) and four more in the six months of service left after returning to Selfridge Air Force Base. It was on my second jump there that I opened my eyes and counted for the first time. Some of those jumps have an interesting twist or two, but I'll save that for another time.

I never lost sight, or hearing, or feeling in my legs again, but even though my autonomic nervous system never again attacked me so severely, in briefings for every jump after that, my palms always sweated, even as they still do today.

Love,

Dad