

The author "hugging" her home drop zone, Skydive the Farm.

# The Door to Now

By Mary Flannery, D.C. | Photos by Warren Cleary

When it comes to skydiving, I believe there are three kinds of people. The first kind hears the word “skydiving” and thinks: “The Best. Idea. Ever!” These are people who enjoy rock climbing, snowboarding, bungee-jumping and eating strange foods for fun. For these people, life is a relentless Mountain Dew commercial, with all their experiences flickering by in jump cuts as they endlessly quest for the next big rush. Or, so I imagine.

The second kind of person thinks skydiving sounds stupid and horrifying. This person is likely to say something like, “Why on earth would you jump out of a perfectly good airplane?” The idea of skydiving is entirely alien and goes against all instincts to this person.

The third kind of person has an instinctual fear of skydiving, but also knows deep down that if they could find a way to break through that fear, they would really enjoy it. Hopefully, that is, if they are alive at the end.

I am the third kind of person. I have never been deeply afraid of heights, but I’ve never been keen on them either. When I’m pushed to an uncomfortably high place my body begins to war with my mind. My mind says, “Hey, it’s alright...this is perfectly safe,” while my body

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enlists my stomach to climb up my throat in a futile attempt to throttle my senseless brain. The net result: nausea, vertigo, racing pulse, flop sweat—a clear message from my body that death is indeed imminent, so pretty please, with sugar on top, return to safer ground, NOW!

I went on my first skydive as a tandem student

in November of 2008. The most surprising thing for me about my first skydive was that I never had a moment in which I was really freaked out and had to overcome the terror I expected to face. I was more afraid of being afraid than the actual skydiving. My tandem experience was more fun than I expected, and I knew I would love to do a tandem jump again.

Over the course of a year and a half I went on three tandem jumps, with each being increasingly amazing as I got more comfortable with the process. I had no interest in becoming a full-fledged, solo skydiver. Because I had spent enough time at the drop zone, I was aware of the Accelerated Freefall (AFF) course, which trains and certifies solo skydivers, but it held no interest for me. I was plenty comfortable just as I was. Then everything changed. This past winter I went through a personal crisis. My marriage of 15 years fell apart. I was doing OK emotionally and keeping busy with my kids

and my new solo life, but deep down I was burying a lot of intense and tough emotions. The end of a 15-year marriage is a pretty big deal, whether I wanted to admit it or not.

My breakthrough came one day when I surprised myself as I broke down in copious and unsolicited tears. I was so out of touch with myself—so numb from the chaos and trials of the past months—that I didn't even know what I was crying about. I just knew I needed something, some breakthrough, some release. I needed to wake up from my fog and do something different!

Through the veil of cathartic tears, I realized that my biggest fear was facing my life alone. While I am a fiercely independent and capable person, I am also very social and possess a strong desire to be connected. I had found myself in a place of disconnectness. Everything I thought I knew about who I was and how I defined myself had been obliterated. I felt naked and vulnerable and terrified.

In that moment of recognizing how raw and afraid I was of being on my own, my mind immediately jumped to an image of me, jumping alone from the door of an airplane. The idea terrified me. But, with that fear was the clear knowledge that people face that fear and jump alone into the open sky on purpose, for a reason.

Being afraid and jumping anyway is something not just anyone can do. Somehow, in that moment, I knew that I would jump alone and I knew without a doubt that I would not only be OK, but that I would experience something so valuable to me that it couldn't be named.

Within two weeks I had set my training course, spent hours in the drop zone (many of them grounded by winds too high for a novice like me), and many hours poring over a training manual. Finally, the weather cooperated and my instructors and I went up to 14,000 feet so I could finally confront the door of the plane and see what I was made of. That was the day I became a skydiver.

The door of the plane has come to represent many important things to me. Even now, with a grand total of 25 jumps made, each ride to altitude finds me in the grip of a numbing fear. My monkey brain begins to gibber that I am not capable enough, that I am not smart enough, that I am not coordinated enough, that I will look dumb, that I will fail, that ... I am just not enough. I fight back. I breathe deeply and tell myself, "I can do it. I am enough!" Sometimes I believe myself and sometimes I don't, but the most important thing is what I do next. Every single time, I keep breathing. I keep focused on

A moment of reflection before approaching the door.



The moment of truth: ready to let go and fly.





Dr. Mary Flannery is back on the ground and all smiles, ready for her next jump.



## Accelerated Freefall (AFF)

A series of seven coached jumps in which certified instructors accompany a student in freefall while holding onto the student's harness as the student demonstrates certain skills. It can be compared to learning to ride a bike with training wheels.

The AFF student wears his/her own parachute and is trained to handle emergency procedures and land on his/her own. AFF training usually consists of a several-hour ground course, and the first jump can often be accomplished on the same day.

### TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT SKYDIVING:

- **United States Parachute Association**  
Website: [uspa.org](http://uspa.org)
- **To find a drop zone near you:**  
[dropzone.com](http://dropzone.com)
- **To see Flannery's skydiving videos:**  
[youtube.com/user/MaryFlanneriffic](http://youtube.com/user/MaryFlanneriffic)

the task at hand. And, I keep moving.

As a chiropractor, I know that movement is life. Life is movement. I keep moving. I do the next thing I have been trained to do, and the next, right up until I am in the door of the plane, looking over the most beautiful sight: the bluest of skies and the blue arc of our planet. And then, shaking and heart pounding, I finally remember that I am enough. I am more than the disapproving voices, and I always will be—and then I keep moving until I have leaped from the plane, and I am flying once again.

And oh, the flying! I could jabber on for ages about the thrill of flying. There is no sickening lurch. It is nothing like falling, or roller coasters, or anything you have ever done. It is only like leaping from an airplane. There's no comparison, nor will there ever be.

Freefall is the most perfect release I have ever encountered. It is more than zen, more than fun, more than beauty. Flying allows me access to the place where all the “stuff” drops

away and I am left with only that which is real and good and true. In the moment I leave the door, not only does the mental chatter quiet, it becomes a joke.

Skydiving has allowed me to redefine myself, to release myself, to trust myself and to be myself in a way I haven't been in years. I have laughed myself sick, stayed up far too late and made more true friends than I knew I could in such a short time.

For all of us, much of life is spent questing for happiness and meaning. Yet, happiness and meaning can only be found in the present. You cannot experience happiness in the past. You cannot experience meaning in the past. Nor, can you experience happiness and meaning in the future. Happiness and meaning are found only in the now, and only if we are awake enough to look them in the face and recognize them and embrace them. When I fly, happiness and meaning fly beside me.

Skydiving for me is the ultimate expression of

a vitalistic life. I am like Dorothy with her ruby slippers; I have the power with me all the time. My panic doesn't win. I have trust on my side. I trust the equipment. I trust the rituals. I trust the process. I trust my support crew. I jump and I fly.

I skydive.

If you are the first kind of person mentioned in the beginning of this article—the adrenaline junkie—it's likely you can barely even read this because you are currently hurtling down a mountain or hanging by your fingers and toes from a cliff. You know what I'm talking about and you'll say “Right on!”

If you are the second kind of person, the kind who really has no interest in extreme experiences, don't worry. There are lots of ways and places to find your path to flight. Just don't stop seeking that path—that is your challenge.

For the rest of you, who are afraid to jump but secretly aware you want to do it: Stop listening to the excuses. Release yourself.

Jump. And fly.

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