

## The Transfer of Ownership

Most of us have no idea what amazing feats we are capable of. However, when we face life's challenges we are able to achieve personal breakthroughs that can result in permanent change. Leaving the perceived security of an aircraft in flight and leaping into the clear blue, arriving safely back on mother earth, creates a perfect opportunity for such an experience. A first jump tandem student can shatter self-doubt, conquer long-held personal fears, and can sometimes be launched into a journey of self-discovery. I have had the honor of being the trusted host of many such experiences as a tandem instructor: a mother who nearly died during childbirth living her life to the fullest while her baby girl looks on; a close family member conquering a fear of heights she had allowed to control her since childhood; a young man with a crippling disease busting through the limits imposed on him by social stereotypes; and many who are completing yet another item on their "list of 100 things to do" in their lives. Each one of them are real people who not only achieved a significant personal transformation, but taught me a little about myself as well. Some of you may be smiling and nodding your head in agreement; for those of you who aren't familiar with this experience, I hope this article will result in significant personal rewards for you as well.

The journey toward what I call "the transfer of ownership" starts at the introduction. I ask my students why they want to make a skydive – nearly every student will eventually tell me something that I can use to make their experience more personal, and sometimes one of the most significant experiences of their life. At that time, from the student's viewpoint, the lion's share of "ownership" of this skydiving experience belongs to me. After all, I am the one teaching them how to be my partner in the air for those few short minutes, emphasizing the simple things they can do to help make our skydive as safe as possible, and calmly addressing the inevitable flurry of questions that come from the doubt surrounding any first-time experience. Eventually, my students trust me with their life – although it may go unsaid, they all know that is ultimately true.

Sometimes a student can be "high maintenance." Kay (not her real name) is my best example. The wife of a local doctor and mother of a young daughter, Kay was introduced to me by her husband. As our conversation progressed, she found out that I am a part-time skydiving instructor, and I asked her to join me for a tandem jump. Her body language was unlike any I had ever seen; she began to withdraw from the outside in – something serious was going on in her heart and mind that I thought would surely keep her on the ground.

Shortly afterwards the torrent of questions began . . . she researched the risks of skydiving on her own by reading internet content including dropzone.com incident forum posts, USPA fatality reports, and soaking in every over-hyped reality TV segment involving a skydiving incident. Between personal conversations, phone calls, and emails she must have asked me over a hundred questions – some of them very difficult to answer. I could have easily become frustrated, but the reality of the situation was that I really wanted Kay to make a skydive; I would answer every single question if it meant there was still a chance she would jump. To keep me sane, I repeatedly imagined seeing the joy on her face after landing. After all, that was the place both of us were working so hard to reach, and it motivated me to keep answering all of Kay's questions.

The day came for our jump, and our pre-jump training and ride to altitude was filled with increasing fear on her part, eventually manifesting itself in physical shaking after I hooked her harness to mine. Despite her obviously being incredibly scared, she never once stopped moving forward toward the door. I asked her if she was ready, and she nodded her head. Exit and free fall were uneventful, and after the canopy opened cooperatively at 4500 feet, her demeanor was surprisingly calm. I could tell she did not like heights by the way she kept leaning her head back, but she continued to respond to all of my gentle instructions.

After a smooth seated landing I unhooked her harness and she began to sob loudly, which I realized was an emotional release of years of pent up fear of flying and high places. After she calmed down a bit and I pulled her to her feet, there in front of me was the real life expression of joy that I had imagined to keep me focused through months of questions. At that point came the transfer of ownership – I directed her attention to the blue sky above, and explained to her that this entire experience happened because she chose to rise to the challenge of an opportunity to conquer her fear. She had indeed trusted me with her life, but more importantly she had trusted herself to do something she knew would be one of her most fearful yet critically important experiences. This was not about me at all – it was all about her. Now that I had painted that clear picture for her, full ownership of the experience was hers alone.

I found out later in a letter from Kay that her first husband had been killed in an aviation accident nearly fifteen years before, and since then she had been deathly afraid of flying. Somehow she recognized skydiving as an opportunity to confront and conquer that fear, and knew that she could trust me to be means to that end. The letter, too personal to include verbatim here, is one of the greatest personal rewards I have received in 22 years of skydiving.

You see, even though you the instructor are the one with the ratings, the high degree of skill, the confidence in the process, and literally in charge of every student skydive, in the end it is all about the student. Through their trust in you they briefly place their lives in your hands because most of them know that although skydiving is a calculated risk, on the other side of that risk lies some sort of unseen benefit that can empower them in ways they never imagined. Now before you lies the choice of arriving for work at the drop zone to haul human cargo for hire, or to arrive in expectation of whose life you might be able to change, along with the possibility that yours might change a bit in the process. There are many more souls out there like Kay, for whom the breakthrough of a lifetime is just one leap of faith away from becoming reality.

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