

LEARNING TO FLY

by Michael Cann 4 December 2020

<https://www.facebook.com/michaeleicann>

<https://www.michaelcann.com/>

When I was little, my mum used to sing me *Summertime* by Gershwin.
The second verse goes like this:

*One of these mornings, you're gonna rise up singing
You're gonna spread your wings
And you'll take to the sky
Until that morning
There's a-nothing can harm you
So hush, little baby, don't you cry.*

When I first saw a paraglider take off the sheer beauty of it stuck with me. It was so elegant, so seemingly simple.

Something in me, without clear reason, was deeply drawn to experience it. So, when lockdown lifted, the first thing I did was book in to do a paragliding training course.

When people asked me, "*Why are you doing that?*" I didn't have a clear answer besides "*I just had an impulse and booked in.*" I figured I would discover something about that impulse by doing it.

Naturally I was afraid. I was afraid because of what I didn't know, and also because of what I did.

The first days of the training did nothing to reduce my fear.

In the theory sessions, I learned many new ways that I could die.

The instructor drew diagram after diagram of the places it was seriously unsafe to go. "*Don't go behind the hill, don't go in front of the cliff, don't go too close to the cloud, don't pull the wrong cord, don't pull the right cord too hard or too soft - or you're in 'deep shit'.*"

I lost track of the number of crucifixes he drew on the whiteboard to represent the places that were potentially fatal to go, and the number of times I heard the sentence, "*If you do this, you're fucked.*"

When the practical training started, it finally dawned on me that I had signed up to shackle myself to a great big sail that was way stronger than me and that obeyed only the wind and pilots who know what they are doing.

I did not know what I was doing.

I spent much time being dragged on the ground, and learning the first crucial skill - how to 'kill the wing'. This means pulling hard on some strings to prevent the wing from inflating and carrying you somewhere near the crucifixes without your consent.

Everything was so unfamiliar: The tangled spaghetti of lines connecting the harness to the wing, the pull of the wind that knocked me off my feet, the bewildering challenge of balancing a whopping great nylon sheet meters above my head.

I mean let's put this in perspective - in the last twelve months I had not done a group activity of any kind at all, and had hardly exercised except for walking in the park near our house. I have never been skilled at sports. I have chosen ultra-low-intensity physical activities like Feldenkrais. And I have avoided most life choices that most people would call 'adventurous'.

This was full-bandwidth new experience.

And suddenly, one of the instructors said, "*Hey Cann, you're ready to do your first flight.*" I said I didn't think I was ready, but he seemed very confident. I went and had a drink of water, then presented myself at the training hill for my first flight, as instructed.

The hill was very steep, but not high. If I'd fallen down it, I would have been okay. But the force of the wind in the glider was enough to be afraid of. Falling wasn't the problem.

With assistance from the trainer, I got the wing in the air above me. Then I froze.

I could hear him speaking to me, and could recognize he was speaking English. But I couldn't assimilate a word he was saying. I figured he was giving me some instructions, but there was no connection between his words, my mind, and my ability to control my body.

I was paralyzed in fear.

The wing collapsed, and we agreed I was actually not ready yet.

Now I was afraid for two reasons. First there was the fear of the activity. Then there was the fear of me.

I had begun to do something against my own judgment. Then, I fallen into so much fear that I couldn't even coordinate my body, let alone follow precise instructions. Could I even trust myself to be safe with myself?

I knew I needed help, and I knew I was blessed with an amazing community of [feelings-literate people](#). I reached out to them. [Gero von Aderkas](#) was the first to answer my call for assistance. He held space for me to fully express the fear that I was feeling. I screamed. I shook. I did all the things my body had wanted to do while the sail was flailing me around on the hill, but which I could not show at the time. It took more than

an hour of high-intensity feelings work, but I was now content to pack my things and head into the mountains for the next days of training.

Another friend and mentor, [Michael Pörtner](#), who is himself an experienced paraglider pilot, wrote to me and encouraged me to 'move at the speed of love.' And with that, I was off.

I slept in my van by the road on the way, and set an alarm for 3:50 am so I could join an international zoom call with others who run, or intend to run, [Rage Clubs](#). But my phone charger was faulty and my phone dropped me out of the call.

Stupidly awake, and stupidly early, I continued the drive into the mountains.

Arriving in Myrtleford I checked my phone and found it had charged despite the faulty charger. And I found a message from two other friends and mentors [Dagmar Thuernagel and Michael Hallinger](#). They were awake and available to talk to me from Germany.

With unexpected time and battery available, I called them, only to find myself in yet another intense [emotional healing process](#). This time, a surge of sadness came forward. I cried and cried.

I felt so sad to feel disconnected from the men in the course (they were all men) because I wasn't progressing as quickly as them. I was sad to feel incompetent to follow through on an intention I had set for myself.

More than anything, I felt sad not to feel able to trust my connection with my inner world and my physical body.

I noticed that I had been unwilling to show any sadness around this group of unfamiliar men. I had told myself a story that I needed to be anything-but-sad in order for men to like me. As I sat crying in my van, I caught myself wondering what any of those men would think of me if they saw me bawling my eyes out as they drove past me.

How would I explain myself to anyone who did not know me well, or understand that my feelings are not a problem to be solved, but an opportunity to be embraced?

Michael Pörtner had encouraged me to use the underlying energy of sadness - which is an impulse towards connection - to repair the connection with my physical body.

And as strange as it may sound, it really worked.

I found a new way to be present with myself and others without hiding my sadness away in a secret cupboard. Amazingly, I found that I could handle my fear much better when I made space for this sadness first.

Instead of trying to dominate my body into action with anger, I followed my genuine impulses into action using sadness as my guide.

By the time I made it to the training site, I was in a very different state to anything I had ever experienced before.

And this time I easefully made multiple flights down the same training hill that I freaked out on before. It was perhaps twenty meters high from launch to landing.

Yes, I had some rough landings... but it was incredible to experience myself - for the first time - choosing to do something physically adventurous without first disconnecting from my body and my real emotional impulses.

By lunchtime, it had already been a big day for me when they announced that we were heading up the nearest mountain to fly from four-hundred meters up.

Instead of getting overwhelmed with my unconscious fear, and trying to use determination (a form of anger) to push through the resistance, I made space for me sadness to come forward.

As we drove up a steep and bumpy 4WD track in a van completely filled with people and gliders, I felt afraid. But I was also sad. Truth be told, I did not let it all out in the way I would have in a feelings workshop. But I consciously held myself at a level where I was just about crying visibly, and let the feeling run through me without getting in the way.

At the top of the hill, with a true sense of connection to myself and my body, I made a clear and centered choice not to do that high flight. And I did not do it. I wanted time to integrate what I had already learned. So I went down the mountain again, and did more training hill practice.

I was relieved to feel my ability to trust myself to say, "No," to the flight, while continuing to stay connected to the group and the training. I felt joy when I saw the other men landing. And I also felt some pain standing on the training hill with my glider. There was no wind down there anymore. Trying to fly from the twenty meter hill was tiring and frustrating.

After a long day, I slept soundly through the night in my van.

I awoke very early next morning. In my morning reverie I realized that there was indeed an additional layer to my pain on the training hill.

Although I appreciated that 'killing the wing' is a crucial skill for a beginner, it is not the main point. I had learned to 'kill the wing' only so that it did not kill me before I could do anything more interesting with it.

I saw that this was exactly the same thing I had so often been doing with my feelings - 'killing the wing' before they could take me anywhere interesting.

Learning to numb and repress my feelings - killing my wing - had become an unconscious and pervasive survival strategy instead of an intermediate step on the path to [living full out](#).

I felt sadness, frustration, and fear about how many times in my life I had 'inflated my glider' only to fight hard against it; how I kept myself on training hills out of fear long after I was ready to move on.

Once again, I cried and cried in my van, letting my sadness fill me up and bring my grieving to a useful completion.

That is when I also remembered my mother singing me *Summertime*.

Unbelievably, I cried while singing the song, crawling out of bed. Later that day, I spread my wing out on the ground and took to the sky from four-hundred meters, knowing that I could most definitely hurt myself, that I did not want to die, and that I was nonetheless ready for the big challenge.

Keeping my sadness at the front of my experience, I experienced a deep appreciation for my morality and vulnerability, recognizing viscerally how I could powerfully care for myself.

I used my fear to attune myself to these important inner details without freezing.

And I used my anger to make a decision to fully commit to my four-hundred meter launch (a half-arsed commitment can be a dangerous thing too).

And it worked. I did the flight maneuvers without a hitch, neatly steering away from a giant tree that was in my path. I came to a firm-but-safe landing in the right field!

Amidst all of that, I had no clear impulse for anyone to video me flying. So this video is NOT me flying, but it does show the location. The first thirty seconds clearly capture part of my experience. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q26Y8S5amEQ&t=17s>.

I guess for a lot of people, a paragliding training is about learning to paraglide. Trust me. You will gain far more value by turning it into a feelings workshop!

On top of that mountain, I found new clarity about my commitment to launching. I had a new reference point for what it means to make a good decision.

After I landed, they invited me to go up again. I sensed inside me and I could tell I did not feel the impulse to fly again. I trusted myself when I said a clear, "No."

Instead, I stood there with a strange sense of completeness. This was a problem for my ego because I had not actually completed the course at that point, and declining that flight meant I could not complete the minimum requirements for an actual license.

For hours I sat uneasily with my decision not to fly again that day. Should I push through so I could get the certificate? Was I letting myself down out of cowering before my fear again?

No. With everything that this had meant to me, it would have made no sense to chase a piece of paper.

I experientially knew what it was like to have a clear and connected impulse to fly, and I would not fly again without that impulse.

The next morning, I went out again to a different training hill. I took all the gear, and listened inside to see if I actually wanted to fly that day.

I did not.

I watched with new eyes as the butterflies and grasses danced with the changing winds. I watched the other pilots take their flights with new appreciation and understanding of what they were doing.

The winds of my life were blowing in a different direction. I said goodbye to the group, and I left the training program.

Back in my van I cried tears of joy and self-appreciation for what that week had meant to me, for the discovery that I am so much bigger than my ego and my survival strategies, for the ability to connect with men without hiding my sadness away unconsciously, for my community that has given me such rich opportunities for growth and learning, for the huge raw beauty of the Earth, for the varied texture of life's experiences, and for the direct experience of authentic adult Courage.

I am not the Michael Cann I was last week.

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard famously said, "*Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.*"

This is my understanding of the last week for now.

Thank you for going on this flight with me. Onward.