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# The Culture of Skydiving

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THE CULTURE OF SKYDIVING

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology with

Honors Program Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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\* \* \* \* \*

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2011

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## ABSTRACT

The culture of skydiving is made up of a community of individuals who regularly jump at a given drop zone. This culture places a high value on individual achievement, self-reliance, and adherence to routine, and it promotes a strong sense of community among its members. The relationships formed between skydivers through the common experience of skydiving go beyond the activity itself. Skydive Kentucky in Elizabethtown supports its community through several unique rites of passage as an individual gradually becomes a member of the group. This drop zone also hosts cookouts and card games for its regular members. Throughout this paper I compare the culture of skydiving to that of firewalking, which promotes many similar values, including self-reliance and community building. A major difference between the two activities can be found in the motivations of the individuals who pursue skydiving and firewalking. Firewalkers seek to overcome personal problems and limiting beliefs, and the activity's leader addresses this in a formal way. Skydivers are out to have fun, doing what they can to make each experience exciting and unique.

Keywords: Ethnography, Culture, Skydiving, Firewalking, Community

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## FIELDS OF STUDY

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## **Introduction**

Skydiving, or jumping out of a plane thousands of feet in the air, falling at 120 miles per hour and ending with a nice float to the earth under a parachute for the last three to five thousand feet might sound a little bit crazy to some people. To others it represents freedom, individuality, and responsibility for their own lives. In the introduction to the *Berkshire Encyclopedia of Extreme Sports*, Booth and Thorpe state, “Culturally, extreme sports are seen as representing values such as fierce individualism, civil disobedience, the quest for human potential, taking control of one's life, and intimate engagements with the environment” (2007:ix). In undertaking this project, I sought to understand and describe the culture of skydivers, beginning with the motivations behind making the first jump out of an airplane, and ultimately to discover what keeps them going after four thousand jumps. I also wanted to find out about the community of skydivers at a drop zone in Elizabethtown, KY. A drop zone is a site where skydivers can perform, and includes a hangar and runway for the airplanes and a landing zone for the skydivers. What I found seemed to be something of a paradox. Skydiving promotes a sense of individualism and independence, of taking control of one's own life, yet the activity revolves around and is made possible by the strong, close community that is established by sharing this experience. In this paper I will explain this apparent contradiction in the values of this microculture.

Skydive Kentucky is located in Elizabethtown, KY at the Addington Field airport. The rectangular building with cream-colored siding looks small next to the hangar, a garage for airplanes. Inside the building to the immediate right is a sort of reception area.

Two perpendicular glass cases filled with various types of skydiving equipment form a check-in desk, where first-time jumpers might receive paperwork or make payments. This area is called the manifest desk. Across from the desk on the left is the manifest board. Here, skydivers may sign up for the plane rides throughout the day, which are scheduled as many as twelve rides in advance.

A few steps further into the building is a large, open area where jumpers who have just landed can pack up their parachutes. The space in this area is organized along the lines of a student/experienced jumper dichotomy. The left side of the building is for students. Along the wall, student parachute packs and jumpsuits hang in neatly organized rows. These will be used by first-time jumpers and students in the early stages of their training, before they have purchased their own gear. The right side of the building is for the experienced jumpers. Jim Moore, the owner of the Skydive Kentucky drop zone, has a work station where he keeps equipment used for repairing and maintaining parachutes, meticulously organized on a board on the wall. A sewing machine sits on the desk below. This area represents the highest level of experience attained at Skydive Kentucky. Jim is the only one at the drop zone who is licensed to work on the parachutes. The previously mentioned packing area in the middle represents the wide range of experience levels in between these two extremes. Officially, anyone who jumps with a parachute may pack it, but a certain level of experience ensures that the packing is done more accurately and safely.

The back of the room is split as well, though the two halves are reversed from the front side. On the right is a small waiting area for customers. About a dozen orange

chairs are laid out in a circle with a television at the end. First-time jumpers will watch a short video with safety information and a legal disclaimer before they go up for their first jump. A jumper's family and friends may also wait here while he or she prepares for the jump. Across from the waiting area on the left is a kitchen area and a break table for the experienced jumpers. Those who spend their entire day at the drop zone take their lunch break here, and on a slow day they might get a card game going. It is an area for relaxing and unwinding. As many skydivers told me, the best way to understand the sport is to observe and experience it firsthand.

## **Methods**

I had a skydiving experience of my own in the fall of 2009. I met a few of the skydivers then and established some contacts that helped with entry into the community. This experience also helped me to connect with the skydivers and understand firsthand what they were saying. Previous skydiving research has shown this to be a huge advantage. Lyng (1990) expressed his difficulty in getting skydivers to talk about the sport and their feelings about it, while Laurendeau (2006) had a much easier time due to his status as an experienced jumper. My research experience was much closer to Laurendeau's than to Lyng's.

The research for the project inspired by my brief foray into skydiving consisted of participant observation, semi-structured recorded interviews, library research, and website analysis. I interviewed two members of the skydiving community, including one student and one experienced professional with several thousand skydives in his time.

Interview questions covered topics including the reasons that people go skydiving, the type of person that is typically involved with the sport, activities of the community, and how skydiving changes people. I conducted observations at a skydiving drop zone in Elizabethtown and recorded a lesson in intermediate skydiving given by the owner of the drop site in Elizabethtown to a female student with 10-20 jumps under her belt. As a check on this data, I have analyzed testimonials from skydivers found online and in *Parachutist* magazine.

I first made contact with the skydiving culture by talking to Michael Marcell. Michael, a Western Kentucky University student in his mid 20s, had been a student skydiver when I went to Elizabethtown in 2009. Michael agreed to an interview when I began the project a year later, in the fall of 2010. After our interview, Michael gave me the name of Larry Compton, a more experienced jumper who went out nearly every weekend. Larry and I met twice in Bowling Green for interviews. The first time I sat down with Larry he began talking before I had a chance to ask any questions. Both Michael and Larry love to talk about skydiving and were excited to participate in a project focused on the culture of skydiving.

When I began the project, my intention was to compare the cultures revolving around skydiving and firewalking. I read about firewalking in an Anthropology class in the fall of 2009 shortly after going skydiving. Firewalking is the practice of walking barefoot across hot coals. It has roots in Greece and India, but became popular in the United States in the 1970s (Danforth 1989). I saw firewalking and skydiving as two very different forms of risk-taking behavior, however I wondered if there could be anything

similar in the motivations and beliefs of the people who participate in these two activities.

The skydiving community turned out to be fairly easy to investigate. There was a drop zone only an hour away in Elizabethtown and several skydivers who lived in Bowling Green and were willing to participate. Firewalking proved to be much more difficult to research. I was unable to find a firewalking center within a reasonable driving distance. Instead I analyzed website of firewalking groups in such places as Canada, New York, and California. Though the role of firewalking in the final paper is much less than I had originally anticipated, firewalking does provide an insightful foil, so I have included brief comparisons of what I was able to find out about firewalking culture with the culture of skydiving.

### **The First Jump**

Most of the people who go skydiving will not make thousands of jumps, and many won't even make two. Yet even the longest careers had to begin somewhere. Therefore it makes sense to begin by analyzing the first jump, including why people do it and what makes them come back. In this section I will present the accounts of four first-time skydivers, including myself, and then follow with analysis.

The following is from a letter written by a first-time skydiver to her friend, quoted in Poynter (1989:30-32). This student had been practicing indoors with a suspended harness. She was being pushed very hard by a drill instructor in order to learn the correct techniques for landing the parachute as well as emergency procedures. She tells about the drive to her first real skydive:

Saturday morning I drive out to the airport, some 50 miles away... I felt like the condemned man must do walking his last 200 yards—in my case I remember each of the 50 odd miles with incredible clarity, the sights, the smells, the sounds, everything. I spent several minutes reviewing all the past loves of my life surrounded by great clouds of nostalgia and finally arrived at the airport feeling quite mellow.

Once on the plane, she gets very nervous but her rigorous training pays off. She is able to perform the way she needs to do without even thinking about it:

I don't remember getting out there the first time, I only know I must have done it because I remember balancing there thinking *Am I never going to get the go signal?* When it came—a slap on the butt and a shouted *GO!* It was such a relief that I jumped off backwards (as prescribed) without any hesitation (anything to get off that damn step)!

Despite the hard work involved in getting to the point of her first jump, she is satisfied with the overall experience. She describes the sensation:

It was timeless and spaceless and a brief glimpse of a totally undemanding eternity. For a few moments—before I had to start worrying about my landing—I had some sensations that I have never had before, a total bodily involvement in a medium that was a tremendous high. People have all sorts of ways to *get off*, to experience that extra kick from life. I've found my thing: I'm hooked.

In general, my own experience accorded with this analysis. In 2009 when I went to go skydiving in Elizabethtown, I did not practice with a harness as did the woman quoted above. Instead I was given instructions and practiced my exit from the plane while it was still on the ground. The drive to the drop zone was about the same (50 miles) for both of us. It was very early in the morning and I tried to sleep in the car rather than allow myself to feel nervous. It was not very effective. I couldn't stop thinking about what I was about to do and why I was doing it.

On the plane ride it was hard not to feel nervous. The engines were loud and the

ride was shaky. It was difficult to communicate with the instructor and the other jumpers. It took about ten minutes for us to reach our jumping altitude, during which time I began to seriously question my decision to go skydiving at all. As the door opened it still seemed unreal to me. My instructor, Larry, attached his harness to mine and we stepped out onto the wing. I don't actually remember jumping off of the wing. The experience was something like being in a car crash. All of a sudden I was somewhere else, with only a vague idea of how I had gotten there.

The feeling was a rush like I'd never had. It gave me so much energy, which I just had to release somehow. I waved my arms and shook my head and yelled. Before I knew it Larry was giving me the signal to pull the parachute cord. At that point my skydive took a turn for the worse. The harness jerked upward and almost brought my breakfast up. I began to lose consciousness. Larry wanted me to steer the parachute, but my condition made this simply impossible. Larry took the reins and guided us in for a graceful landing, and once I felt the ground beneath me again, I felt better.

People have all kinds of reasons for going skydiving. Longtime skydiver Lois Davis recounts her first jump in a *Parachutist* article: "I still recall screaming with joy during the freefall, then silence—total, complete silence—during the canopy flight." Davis had recently been through a divorce and was hoping to get some emotional relief. Once on the ground, she knew that skydiving had done the trick. Davis writes, "as I sat there laughing, it dawned on me that this was the first time in six months that I had not forced a smile. My life changed in that second—love returned to my heart" (Davis 2010:12).

For Davis, emotional turmoil drove her to make the jump into skydiving, but not everyone requires a specific event to get into the sport. When I asked Larry why people go skydiving, he said, “a lot of them it's to face a personal fear or challenge.” On my last visit to the skydiving drop zone in Elizabethtown, over a year after my first jump, I spoke with “Jack,” a young man from Lexington who was making his first jump. He had been waiting almost two hours since he had arrived at the drop zone, which he told me had given him plenty of time for his nerves to grow worse, but not his resolve. Waiting only made him want it more. He was there because he didn't think he could do something like skydiving, and wanted to prove to himself that he could. After his jump he was speechless and still shaking five minutes later. He told his family, who had been standing outside watching the whole time, that he would like to do it again.

The circumstances that bring people to skydiving can vary greatly. For many, such as a ninety year-old woman Larry took skydiving in 2010, it is a “bucket list” item. Michael got into it after doing a video project on skydiving. I went because an opportunity had presented itself. My sister was writing a story for the school newspaper about the skydiving club at WKU, and we both went because we had a good excuse. No matter the reason, skydivers always seem to find what they were looking for and more.

The long period of wait before the skydive, whether it is at the drop zone or on the drive there, gives first-timers an opportunity and a cause for some self-reflection. No matter how many times the safety measures of skydiving have been emphasized, the novice jumper is likely to consider the possibility of injury or death. This prompts some level of internal self-examination, possibly focusing on people and relationships, or

perhaps a questioning of motives. Jack become nervous during this period, and the student quoted in Poynter (1989) became mellow. I remember wondering what it meant to be the kind of person who would go skydiving, and whether I wanted to be one of those people. I managed to find the answer to the first question by my research of the community.

The brief freefall experience is the most powerful, transcendent moment of the entire skydive. Celsi (1992:637) calls it the “flow” experience, characterized by “a sense of release, timelessness, and freedom,” and representing “a release from conscious constraints, such as self-doubt and socially imposed limitations.” It clearly has an effect which carries on after the skydiver has landed. It is one of those moments that the mind can always return to and is enough to get some people to take up skydiving regularly or even professionally. For others, it is a gateway to other extreme sports. For me, the freefall experience overcame the negative feelings I had after the parachute had been deployed. It was that rush of energy that I remember best. Larry Compton has seen quite a few reactions of first-timers once they hit the ground, saying “they are the most exuberant people you'll ever meet. They are so appreciative. I get all kinds of thank-yous and other accolades. They're glad to have done it.” Similar motivations and results as those found by many skydivers are also sought after in firewalking.

### *The Firewalking Connection*

In firewalking, there is a preparation stage before the actual event. Firewalkers are informed of the risks involved and warned to participate only under the guidance of a certified leader. Based on reading firewalking websites, the instructors will spend quite a

lot of time going over safety measures and practicing moves. The same general preparations are made in skydiving. After this technical preparation, firewalking leaders go one step further. According to [firewalkniagara.com](http://firewalkniagara.com), “In the workshop prior to the firewalk you will look at your life and your belief system. You will identify what you need to 'break through' and together we will experience exercises to work through these issues.” This can be interpreted as simply a more formalized version of what many first-time skydivers do in the long wait before jumping. The skydiving instructor may casually probe into the first-timer's motivation, but this is not the focus of the experience, as it is in firewalking.

While overcoming fears or emotional problems is just one of many reasons that people go skydiving, it is the primary reason for firewalking. Firewalking leaders stress the transformative nature of the experience even more than the activity itself. From [firewalkniagara.com](http://firewalkniagara.com), “Our goal is to get people empowered, and your experience will be the same whether or not you walk.” [Firewalks.com](http://Firewalks.com) describes their seminar as “an incredible opportunity to challenge and change limiting beliefs and fears and to create some very powerful and resourceful emotional states within yourself.” Because they have addressed fears and problems directly in the seminars, not everyone will need to actually walk on fire to get the most out of the experience. After the walk, the group sits together and talks about the experience.

While skydiving almost always has a transformative effect and may even be the primary motivation for the individual making the jump, it is addressed only casually by the community and always on an individual level. The experience would certainly be

much less effective in this respect if the first-timer failed to make the jump. Firewalking leaders may not be bothered if an individual backs out at the last second, but skydivers strongly encourage people to go through with the jump. As Larry told me, “there are several people I've had to talk out of the airplane. And they're scared to death. Going to that door can be the most terrifying thing for a person.” Overcoming that fear makes the experience effective and is worth it during the transcendent experience of freefall.

### **Fierce Individualism**

Just as the first jump encourages self-reflection and self-empowerment, every skydive afterwards reinforces that confidence by forcing individuals into a situation in which they must depend on themselves. Larry Compton stressed this point in both of my interviews with him: “Every time you leave the door of that airplane, it's all you. Nobody else is going to save your life except for you. And that's what I tell my students. Because no matter all the training that I give you, when it comes down to it, you are responsible. You have to save your life.” His statement, “nobody is going to save your life except you” sounded like something he said often, like he had practiced the diction and pacing of it to get it exactly right. This is something that anyone who has been alone at 10,000 feet will no doubt understand. This responsibility for the self inspires in skydivers an adherence to routine and extreme focus.

Lyng (1990) proposes another motivation for people engaged in what he calls “edgework” activities. Edgework is an exploration of the boundaries “between order and disorder, form and formlessness” (Lyng 1990:858). These are activities which are taken

up voluntarily and involve a clear threat to the physical or mental health of the participant. Besides skydiving, edgework activities may include hang gliding, rock climbing, or even dangerous occupations such as fire fighting or police work. Lyng suggests that in our postindustrial world, people are likely to feel threatened by forces completely outside of their control, such as nuclear war, environmental degradation, or economic instability. Edgework activities, where survival can unquestionably be attributed to individual skill, give people a greater sense of control in their own lives. One component of this sense of control is the focus displayed by skydivers during the jump.

#### *Focus*

Lyng (1990) and Laurendeau (2006) both note that maintaining control in the face of chaos is a vital skill valued by those who participate in edgework activities. Parachute malfunctions can happen despite every precaution, and when they do, the skydiver who loses his cool in these situations will be injured or killed. In addition to equipment errors, skydivers may make some mistakes if their mind is somewhere else. Larry referred to those moments in the air as a temporary release from the problems of everyday life. No matter what was bothering him, when he went up in the plane, it didn't matter. "It is probably one of the most caught-in-the-moment type situations you'll ever be in," he said. On the ground inside the building, a skydiver's attention can easily wander without consequence. But in the plane and in the air, there is only one thing in their minds, and that is their training.

That training begins with simple, controlled jumps which are carefully observed

by a licensed instructor. One type of training jump is called static line, where a cord attached to the airplane pulls a jumper's parachute automatically when they jump from a low altitude. The jumper may also have a radio in his helmet to receive instructions from the ground. This is done to give the jumper practice in piloting and landing with a parachute. Another form of training is called accelerated freefall (AFF). In this method, an instructor jumps along with the student, holding on in the first few jumps, but gradually allowing more control to the student as he or she progresses. If a skydiver is to advance beyond the training stage, they must acquire the ability to maintain focus.

Laurendeau and Brunschot (2006) include a story about a student skydiver who could not remember his training in a moment of crisis. On his seventh jump he failed to activate his main or reserve parachute. A reserve parachute, or AAD (automatic activation device) is a backup parachute that is deployed automatically at a certain altitude. The reserve activated itself and the student survived, but was not allowed to continue to jump at that particular drop zone. Larry told me a similar story. It started with a student having trouble exiting the plane. She could not relax, he said. In the air, she deployed her parachute too late, and the reserve also activated. In two minutes of parachute fall, she was not able to solve the problem. These students were unable to maintain that all-important focus, and therefore could not make a successful skydive. One way that focus can be produced and enforced is by an adherence to routine.

### *Routine*

Lyng (1990:874) states, “skydivers spend more time *preparing* for a jump than they do making it.” This is an understatement. Preparation goes far beyond the five or so

minutes it takes to get from the plane to the ground. The routine can begin as early as the drive to the drop zone. Michael said he listens to music in the car in order to get into the mindset of having a good time. At the drop zone, a skydiver can sign up for a plane ride on the manifest board. During the wait, experienced skydivers will check and double-check the condition of their gear for safety and proper performance. Students and first-timers are issued parachute packs and gear which have already been prepared and checked by the professionals.

As the skydivers' scheduled plane ride approaches, they begin to put on the jumpsuit and the rest of the gear, including altimeter, goggles, and the parachutes. Once dressed for a jump, they practice the moves they will be performing with the gear on. The jumpsuit and parachute can be constraining to movement, so the skydiver wants to loosen up and get used to the feel of things. In the airplane on the ten minute ride up to altitude, they go over the whole routine again in their mind, thinking especially about emergency procedures. If the weather or the wind speeds require special maneuvers, they will be sure to be prepared.

Routine even extends beyond the act of skydiving and the safety measures involved. At the end of business hours every day one of the employees will turn on a blue light on the wall. This serves the function of a "closed" sign on a shop window, except that it is inside the building, reminding the skydivers rather than customers that they can stop working and start drinking beer, playing cards, and enjoying themselves. Even on a rainy day when they have been doing these things already they still turn on the blue light as an act of routine.

### *Sensation Seeking and the Quest for Human Potential*

The importance of routine is complicated by one of the central motivations of advanced skydivers, known as sensation seeking. Sensation seeking is “a trait defined by the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience” (Zuckerman 1979:10).

The risks and benefits involved in a situation are assessed in different ways by different people. Zuckerman (1979) suggests that high sensation seekers place more value on the benefits of risky behavior than do low sensation seekers, and may either underestimate the risks or be more willing to accept them. However, based on my time spent around skydivers, they do not appear to underestimate the risks involved. Everyone who jumps at Skydive Kentucky must sign a legal waiver, with a warning in big bold letters about the dangers of death or injury. Many skydivers have been injured themselves and have witnessed the deaths of friends. It would take a great deal of cognitive dissonance for skydivers to underestimate the risks involved with their sport.

Skydivers' assessment of risk is influenced by the sense of control that they have over the situation. The skydiver who remembers his training, knows his equipment, and carefully follows routine will face a lower level of risk than someone who is not careful. I was told by many skydivers that they would not go bungie jumping because of the lack of control over the situation. Lyng (1990) suggests that skydivers and other risk seekers would not typically be interested in gambling, again due to lack of control. Some forms of gambling allow for more control than others, however. If frequent high-stakes casino visits are avoided, more casual and friendly betting is not. As I left Skydive Kentucky on

a rainy day after business hours, a group of jumpers were starting up a poker game.

Once a skydiver is beyond the learning stage and into his or her hundredth or even thousandth jump, a routine fall and regular landing cannot sufficiently satisfy the need for novel and complex sensations. One of the ways in which skydivers may push the envelope is called free dimensional skydiving. This is “a group of skydiving disciplines that encompass some of the more creative aspects of skydiving... In freestyle skydiving, the skydiver performs maneuvers that resemble dance and gymnastics while freefalling at speeds ranging typically from 110 mph to 180 mph” (Rinehart and Sydnor 2003:105). The following is an excerpt from the journal of Tamara Koyn, quoted in Rinehart and Sydnor (2003:107). She is a free dimensional skydiver, here describing her experience training for the World Freestyle Championships at West Tennessee Skydiving in 1992:

I felt good and that, someday, I'll be able to skydive well enough for some big project. With the power of a jetliner, the plane surged forward and I watched the ground peel away. “Concentrate,” I thought to myself. I closed my eyes, rehearsing every detail of the dive. “Pinwheel launch, shifting the weight straight forward out the door, staying upright, believing in the relative wind, then bringing my right arm forward to stop back looping, and assume the side stag position...” I knew that I had barely enough time to mentally practice the dive twice before performing my last gear check.

Tamara undergoes an intense training schedule, waking up at 4:45 am and completing four jumps before noon. “I wondered what motivated the other fun jumpers at this hour. Pushing to this extent didn't seem like the fun pleasure jumpers would be looking for. My desire to improve my freestyle was more than enough motivation” (Rinehart and Sydnor 2003:108).

Another way in which skydivers might push the limits of human potential is by

jumping with props. The most commonly used prop is a raft. Lighter-weight skydivers may ride down in the raft while the stronger ones lift it out of the airplane and ride along down by holding onto a rope along the outside. Some of the props are simply unbelievable. According to Larry, “out in Arizona, out in the desert they jump with cars, they jump makeshift living rooms with couches and coffee tables and t.v. and everything.”

Finally, the use of high-performance canopies is a way to increase the risk of the jump and the potential for new sensations. As Laurendeau (2006:593) explains, “The technology informing rectangular parachutes has improved dramatically, and increasingly sophisticated high-performance canopy designs have emerged.” These parachutes are smaller and more responsive to the skydiver's movements than parachutes have been in the past. This allows them to perform more complicated landing maneuvers. It also has the effect of amplifying any mistakes that the skydiver may make, leading to an increase in injuries and death of experienced skydivers. I asked Larry Compton if it was worth the risk, and he explained:

We                    Here's the way I look at it, and I think the way most jumpers look at it. We know what we do is dangerous. On top of that, we've done everything we can to make it safe. Now, like I said we jump small, high performance parachutes. You don't have to do that. You don't have to do these low hook turns, gaining lots of speed. But it's what drives a lot of us. You know some people never want to do that. I do, a lot of people do, and we know that if you do not get underneath your canopy in time, that you're going to eat it.

Zuckerman (1979) offered many theories to explain sensation seeking, but two of those in particular described the skydivers at Skydive Kentucky, those being a higher value placed on benefits and a greater willingness to accept risks. Skydivers understand that what you

get out of the sport is proportional to what you put into it.

### *The Firewalking Connection*

Individualism does not seem to be a value that is as strongly developed in firewalking as it is in skydiving. Websites such as [corporatefirewalking.com](http://corporatefirewalking.com) and [firewalking.com](http://firewalking.com) promote firewalking as a team-building activity for businesses and corporations. Seminars are always done in larger groups and the participants share stories and help out one another. The actual walk on hot coals is done solo, but other participants are close at hand to shout and provide encouragement. This is not to say that there is no encouragement or sense of community in skydiving, which I will discuss in the next section, but the skydiving is an activity that by its nature is almost always experienced alone or with one other person (in a tandem jump). Observers must wait on the ground and can only hear about the event secondhand.

Even though firewalking is promoted as a single transformative event or team-building activity, it can offer something beyond this to people who do it regularly. If firewalking becomes simply routine or even mundane after time, it may nevertheless take on a ritual significance for those who practice it, reinforcing its effects and reminding firewalkers of the significance of their first experience. It can be a moment of timelessness and lowered self-awareness, which Celsi (1992) says is a common feature in many edgework activities. Even though skydivers keep the sport dynamic by pushing the envelope and testing their limits, the freefall experience is likely to take on a similar meaning for those who do it regularly.

## **Community**

In their exploration of biological explanations for risk-taking behavior, Self and Findley say that “extreme sports subcultures attract risk takers because they promote a sense of belonging that is elusive to many risk takers who are surrounded by a risk-averse, normal population” (2007:247). In the community of skydiving, risk takers may find a rare group of people with whom they can not only participate in this activity, but also talk about it in a way that outsiders just don't understand. Larry explained to me the appeal of the community:

Most people you encounter though, they have the attitude of skydiving 'that's crazy that's dangerous', they'll make up all kinds of excuses not to do it, most of the time they're just trying to justify their fear by putting down what you do. I've got to where I really don't talk about it. Hell my friends, I don't even talk to them about it because they don't understand it.

While the skydiving experience may not be validated within the skydiver's wider social circle, the skydiving community offers a unique place in which these experiences can be shared.

Laurendeau and Brunshot (2006) offer another theory on the formation of community in skydiving. The sport is limited in ways that sports like hiking or biking are not. Jumping and landing cannot be practiced just anywhere. Certified drop zones, equipment, and planes are all necessary for a skydive. This has the effect of bringing people together in one place. The open sky may offer a certain sense of freedom, but in reality only a portion of the sky is open. People come from all over Kentucky to jump in Elizabethtown and establish friends and contacts at the drop zone there.

The spirit of individualism and responsibility for oneself might at first seem to

contrast with the community-oriented nature of the culture and the way that skydivers help and look out for each other. However, that individuality and self-reliance that Larry talked about over and over is something that skydivers all have in common. On a rainy Saturday, skydivers will not be able to do any jumping, but they often show up to the site anyway. I drove to Elizabethtown on one of these days, not expecting to see much, but ten regular jumpers had shown up to hang out, play cards, and drink beer. In the back of the building at the break table three guys were learning to play backgammon from a fourth. They were soon to abandon this for a game of cards, which they invited me to join, but I declined in order to wander around and take notes.

### *Training*

I soon stumbled on a skydiving lesson being given to a student. The training of new students takes on a collaborative style, as if the entire community has adopted a child and is raising her together. In the front of the building on that rainy Saturday, Jim Moore was making the most of a dreary day by giving a verbal lesson and quiz to Carrie Transue, a student with fifteen or so jumps under her belt. Neither Jim nor Carrie knew the exact number, but such information is kept on record in the computer system and in the student's personal logbook.

Jim was sitting in a chair, but just barely. He was constantly making motions with his arms, leaning over to the table to write a note on his answer sheet, and occasionally getting out of the chair to do a demonstration or to go pick up some piece of equipment. Carrie sat across from him about four feet away. She gave her answers confidently when she knew them, and

admitted when she did not. When she struggled, Jim gave her some help with the answers.

During these lessons and quizzes for Carrie, some of the guys that had been playing cards came over and started giving their input on the questions Jim was asking, telling stories about their own jumps, and giving advice and warnings to the student. It became very loud and confusing with so many people talking at once, but they simply couldn't help themselves. Skydivers love the sport and they love talking about it. The collaborative style of training combines the experiences of everyone in the community, resulting in a more effective training which covers more situations than any one skydiver could.

Michael Marcell helped to explain the student/experienced jumper dichotomy from the viewpoint of still being in the student phase. He said he didn't know the experienced jumpers, who came in from other cities or even other states, as well as they knew each other. He went skydiving solely to learn and get better, and the sole topic of conversation between him and the others revolved around his lessons. He did note that he seemed to be the exception in this respect and that the rest of the group seemed to be pretty close with each other. "I think once you get past the student status and you're kind of taken in and you're a regular there, you're able to focus more on friendships because it becomes routine."

### *Group Jumping*

Group jumps are called "boogies." At larger dropzones, a boogie may involve the use of specialty aircraft or larger planes. Helicopters and balloons may come into play as

well. Skydivers from all over the country will register and join in. A boogie can be a chance for skydivers to show off, learn new tricks, and establish bonds with other serious skydivers. As Larry put it, “we will jump our asses off all day long, party hard at night, get up and do it all over again the next day.” A boogie may last for a weekend or as long as ten days.

Obviously skydivers want their friends and co-jumpers to know as much as possible before going out for a jump. This is why they take such an interest in a new student's training. As much as it is an individual pursuit on a solo jump, the ultimate goal for a beginning skydiver is to advance to the point where they can join the elite group of licensed jumpers. As Larry told me, “every skydiver when they start off... they're striving to get to jump with the experienced jumpers. They want to be a part of that group.” Entry into the group is earned when skydivers prove themselves to be ready. Four levels of licenses are awarded by the United States Parachute Association (USPA) according to a skydiver's completion of various requirements, including the total number of solo and group jumps performed, total time spent in freefall, and accuracy of landings. More advanced licenses allow jumpers more privileges, such as jumping after dark, landing over water, or instructing other students.

“You're going to start off by doing two and three-way jumps with experienced jumpers before we'll ever put you in over your head because you can endanger yourself and other jumpers,” Larry said. Sometimes this process can be slow, and sometimes it simply doesn't happen at all, as Larry explained:

In my years I've seen people who come into the sport and they never get it. They never get it. They will never progress to the point where they're

jumping in big groups. Because they don't learn the skills nor do they appreciate the dangers and the safety and they're just not invited on jumps.

What they are not getting is the ability to maintain complete control in a situation verging on chaos. These individuals are paralyzed by fear and cannot maintain that critical focus described by Lyng (1990) as the crucial element for survival, the element which separates extreme sports from other activities. Skydivers must be able to trust one another when they jump together in large groups, and certain licenses that can be attained provide concrete evidence that a skydiver has reached a level of experience where they can be trusted.

Turner's (1969) concept of "communitas" describes a community formed by shared experiences. A greater bond and a higher level of trust can be formed when a skydiver knows that her partner has been through the same ordeal that she has. Skydivers go through certain rites of passage, discussed below, in order to join the group. All skydivers share that experience of earning their own way, and can connect almost instantly with other skydivers from across the world. Jim Moore explained to me while leafing through a copy of *Parachutist* and pointing out people he knew that I could go to drop zones near and far, mention his name, and someone would know who he was. Communitas is spontaneous, immediate, and concrete, and can be formed anywhere by any group of people who share that common experience (Turner 1969). Even if they trained on opposite sides of the world, skydivers will have gone through many of the same trials and have will have similar stories to tell. Several skydivers quoted in Celsi (1992) speak of a special kind of bond between skydivers regardless of background.

*Rites of Passage*

It is not hard to understand why someone who is passionate about the sport would want to advance to a level where they can participate in these boogies. The close-knit community of a smaller drop zone such as the one in Elizabethtown goes a long way towards encouraging the discipline and relentless training involved in advancing in the sport. In the spirit of finding a sense of belonging in this group, a sort of rite of initiation exists at the skydiving drop zone in Elizabethtown, where everyone who completes their first solo jump has their shirttail cut off and hung on the wall with their name and the date of the jump commemorated in permanent ink on the shirt. In return, they are given a free shirt with the Skydive Kentucky logo.

Shirttails cover any blank spaces on the walls and even hang from the ceiling. Many of the shirts include some sort of personalized quote or a reaction to the experience, such as “My sister can't skydive, but I can,” “Stay off the fence,” or “Where's my pilot?”. This is one of Jim Moore's traditions and goes back several decades, carrying over from his previous drop zone. The ritual he said, originated with student pilots learning to fly airplanes. Pilots would do this as a way of clipping their “feathers” or their “tail” once they had reached a certain level of experience. Though the atmosphere of the place achieves this well enough, this ritual can give jumpers an added sense of belonging to the skydiving community and provide an important visual sign that they have made it to a certain point in their jumping experience where they can start to get some respect and acceptance from other jumpers.

According to Van Gennep (1960), a rite of passage is a ritual that marks a transition in social status. Van Gennep identified three stages, beginning with a

separation of the individual from the group to which he or she previously belonged, followed by a transitional period, and ending with full incorporation into the new group. Carrie's lesson with Jim while the other skydivers played cards in the back may be interpreted as a literal separation. Looking at the entire training process however, she was in the transitional phase during the lesson. The separation stage in skydiving begins when a jumper chooses to go beyond the first jump and make a long-term commitment to the sport. They have distinguished themselves from those who just make one jump and quit, but they are not yet at the level where they can jump unsupervised.

Characteristics of the liminal or transitional phase include obedience and submission to a leader or even to the entire community (Turner 1969). In skydiving this simply means listening to the instructions and advice of the more experienced jumpers, the wisdom that they are eager to impart, and that the student is just as eager to hear. When the other jumpers came over and contributed their ideas to the lesson, Carrie listened and asked questions. Liminal individuals begin as a blank slate and absorb the knowledge of the community. Socially, someone in the liminal phase is still at a distance from the rest of the group. Michael told me that he did not spend time with the other skydivers and instead stayed focused on his training while at the drop zone.

The final stage of the rite of passage, that of incorporation, may often be accompanied by a shared meal (Van Gennep 1960). On the day of Carrie's lesson, there had been plans for a cookout, but the rain dampened this prospect. Instead, there was a card game and beers had by all. This was not the final incorporation because Carrie still had some training left, but she was briefly treated as a full member of the community

during this “meal.” There may be several rites of incorporation as the student skydiver advances and gradually works his or her way into the community.

Another element of the rite of incorporation is an exchange of gifts: “The movement of objects among persons constituting a defined group creates a continuous social bond between them” (Van Gennep 1960:31). This is precisely what the t-shirts hanging on the walls represent. The student, having given something of her own to Skydive Kentucky, binds herself to the Elizabethtown drop zone. Skydive Kentucky reciprocates with a t-shirt of its own, binding itself to the student. Having their name and t-shirt on the wall works as a visual symbol of their place among the others in the community.

This t-shirt exchange can also be seen as an example of another element of incorporation, the “purification of the clothing and belongings of the stranger” (Van Gennep 1960:27). Another example is found in the jumpsuits worn by students. When the skydiver has advanced to the point where she makes the commitment to purchase her own gear, she moves out of the student phase and into a more experienced phase.

The learning stage never truly ends, and there is always room for an experienced jumper to advance further, though the shirttails mark the most visible and likely the most significant rite of passage a jumper will attain. At this point, they are officially in the club. Further rituals for later stages of experience, such as 100, 1000, or 10,000 jumps, include a pie in the face, dousing with water, and ultimately rotten eggs or sour coleslaw at ten thousand jumps. I had to ask Jim if he was messing with me when he told me about the last one, but he assured me it was real. Ordeals and humiliations are not

uncommon in rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960).

*Away from the Drop Zone*

On the morning of my first skydive, I wondered what it meant to be a skydiver. I wanted to know what skydivers do with their time besides jumping out of planes. Michael told me that the experienced jumpers at Skydive Kentucky came from all walks of life. One is a lawyer, he said, another is a cop, and some work in construction. Larry told me that he and some of the other jumpers liked to go to the firing range and shoot guns. He called the skydiving community a “rebellious group,” and gave me a story to illustrate the point:

extremely uh... I drinking, we've got to do outside of a building... So thirteenth floor to the ledge like this right	We used to jump Thunder over Louisville. And we would land on a little barge in the middle of the Ohio River. Eight of us. Well it was bad weather that year, thunder, we knew we couldn't jump. And don't know so it was about one o'clock in the morning, we're drinking, we're bored, we know we're not jumping the next day so something dangerous. I said hell let's climb the we're on the thirteenth floor, and we climb from the twenty-fifth floor and sat on the balcony, I mean on the here and drank beer at one o'clock in the morning.
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Skydivers also enjoy participating in other activities that can be classified as edgework. Michael told me that he has had some experience in scuba diving, surfing, and rock climbing. Larry and some of his friends have been known to go white water rafting and rock climbing from time to time. Others will go BASE jumping—jumping with parachutes off fixed objects, such as buildings, antennae, spans or bridges, and earth. Larry captured the essence of a skydiver perfectly when he said, “They're go-getters, strong-willed, strong personality types for the most part. I mean there are some people that are very shy, very timid, but for the most part they're strong-willed.”

This sort of behavior may be driven by what Dunning (2008) identifies as a trend of an achievement-oriented focus in modern sport. “This is seen,” he says, “in the striving to break records, in the hours of grueling training that are employed towards that end, and in the application of scientific methods to the goal of improving performance” (2008:209). Skydiving has always, by its nature been this kind of sport. Though there are competitions between teams of skydivers, the toughest rival for a skydiver is the self. Participating in other edgework activities allows skydivers to extend their personal achievement base into other realms.

### *The Firewalking Connection*

The emphasis on community-building is an area where skydiving and firewalking have much in common. As mentioned previously, the purpose of many firewalking seminars is to build a sense of community among individuals working together in a business or corporation. When routine office work fails to create strong bonds between the workers, a shared firewalking experience is certain to do the trick. Even though the risk of a firewalk is not as high as that in skydiving, it is still an experience that is out of the ordinary and its effects will be remembered long after the event. Those who participate in a firewalk for their own personal benefit are likely to form friends with whom they will continue to keep in touch. They will also be able to form bonds with people who have gone firewalking at other locations.

Like skydiving, firewalking represents a rite of passage. Co-workers move from a state of little to no familiarity with one another into a group with which they will share a lasting and meaningful bond. The separation begins when the seminar or corporate

retreat begins. Just as the second or third jump takes a skydiver beyond the level of one-time jumpers, attending the firewalking seminar puts the participants one step closer to the community they will soon be joining. Most of the firewalk itself is a liminal phase as each individual reflects on the problems he or she wishes to overcome through the firewalk. The beginning of incorporation and the parallel to the skydiver's first solo jump is the actual barefoot walk across hot coals. When the firewalker reaches the end, he or she joins the stronger group that has been created by the firewalking experience. Afterwards when the participants share stories, they are engaging in a symbolic exchange of "gifts."

### **Engagements with the Environment**

In an environment that cannot be controlled, skydivers must make some adaptations. Constant awareness of environmental conditions, such as wind speed, direction, and temperature, are vital to performing a successful jump. Larry told me what precautions are necessary in extreme cold or high altitudes:

They have to be breathing one hundred percent pure oxygen for an hour or two hours before they go up because they've got to get all the nitrogen out of their system. You go up there, you get hypoxia just like when a scuba diver ascends too quick. The nitrogen bubbles up in his bloodstream.

The wind speed will affect which canopy a jumper might use, as well as how they choose to approach their landing. Rain and stormy weather put a hold on any skydiving.

Environmental awareness can not only make a skydive more enjoyable, it can save lives.

Aside from getting to know their environment in such a statistical, scientific way, skydivers have access to a unique and possibly emotional perspective on the

environment. It forces the jumper to see just how small everything really is. Before I went skydiving in 2009, I had been on an airplane and had seen satellite pictures of the earth from above, and between 10,000 and about 5,000 feet, the view looked just like those pictures. What I saw became so much more real when I was floating down toward the ground in the parachute, gradually approaching the grass and the roads, finally landing my feet on it once more. Davis (2010) felt something similar: “I was in awe of God and his creation. Suddenly, the little dots I had been seeing became cows, cars and people.” It may have been this perspective in addition to the intense focus that caused Larry to describe skydiving as a temporary release from the problems of everyday life. Seeing the world from a distance may help a jumper understand that their daily troubles are not so big after all.

## **Conclusions**

The culture of skydiving promotes a seemingly conflicting set of values in individualism and community. The jump is by necessity a solo act, requiring a great deal of focus, control, and self-confidence. Skydivers value the responsibility and the control of their own fate, and they must earn their own way toward advancement in the sport through individual effort and experience. In spite of this, skydivers take every opportunity to counter this individuality by jumping in groups and doing formations, by coaching and helping each other out, by encouraging other jumpers to continue, and celebrating their successes. The self-improvement and spirit of individualism gained through skydiving are a means to an end, and that end consists of full incorporation into

the skydiving community. There are several rites of passage marking the various levels of advancement in the sport, but none are more significant than the first solo jump, after which the jumper leaves his or her shirttail on the wall at Skydive Kentucky. The individual struggle of each student to learn skydiving and join the ranks of the elite is something that everyone in the community can contribute to, but only one person can finish.

As I walked around the building for the last time, taking pictures and thinking it was about time for me to leave, I thought about my project as a whole. The data from interviews had caused me to change my focus many times, from exploring the motivations of first-timers, to the pride of being in the community, the process of joining it, and the importance of individualism and self-responsibility. Articles and books only seemed to complicate matters with their big terms and social theories. Visiting the drop zone had helped to clear some things up, but I still felt like there was something missing. I decided to be straightforward and simply ask Jim to help me understand. He simply turned and pointed to a banner on the wall and asked, “What's the first rule?” “Our first rule is have fun,” it said. And it all seemed so simple now. The Skydive Kentucky motto was written on the wall in big letters, on their business cards, the website, and just about everywhere else they could put it. It had been staring me in the face the whole time. Skydivers might join a community, realize their own self potential, overcome their fears, and see their lives changed forever, but all of these are just pieces of the number one reason to go skydiving and the number one rule: have fun.

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