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“If You’re Reading This, It’s Because I’ve Died”: Masculinity and Relational Risk in BASE Jumping

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In this autoethnography, I highlight the relationship between risk and responsibility in my gender project as I first take up, and then walk away from, BASE jumping. To address these issues, I write into a space of uncertainty, exploring the productive potential of polyvocality and writing as a method of inquiry.

Dans cette auto-ethnographie, je souligne la relation entre le risque et la responsabilité dans mon projet de genre alors que j’entreprends puis abandonne le BASE jump. Pour répondre à ces questions, j’écrit dans un espace d’incertitude et j’explore le potentiel productif de la plurivocité et de l’écriture comme méthode d’enquête.

Proem

It is October 2007. I stand on the edge of the antenna, 220 feet above the darkened field below, the cold wind cutting through my skin. I am a BASE jumper. Or am I? I am an (auto)ethnographer. Or am I?

What I am, at this moment, is distracted. Jeff, an experienced BASE jumper, is just a few feet away, setting up a static line designed to save my life when I jump from this antenna a few minutes from now. “BASE” involves parachuting from fixed objects such as bridges, cliffs, and antenna (see Ferrell, Milovanovic & Lyng, 2001; Martha & Griffet, 2006). As a jumper once said to me, BASE is like skydiving, only dangerous. Standing on the antenna with Jeff, I should be excited. Or terrified. Or something. Instead, I’m just cold. Cold, and worried about Rosco. There’s a paper here. I just have to figure out what it is. But not now. Now, I should focus on jumping from this antenna.

“We Could Death Camp You”5

After he had done a couple of jumps himself, Jeremy, a jumper and friend with whom I’ve been talking about BASE for years, floors me: “So, how serious are you about wanting to do a jump?”

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My stomach jumps into my throat, my fingers tingling. Jeremy’s question takes me back to those Decembers of my childhood when I was so impatient to open Christmas gifts that I actually snuck around the house, found as many as I could, then unwrapped them, rewrapped them and put them back where I found them. “Are you for real?!”

“Sure, we could death camp you,” he says. “How about you meet me back here after we do this next jump?”

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As my research assistant and I wait for our maki rolls, I fidget with my disposable chopsticks. Rub them together to smooth them out. Fit them into my hand. Tap them lightly on the table top to line them up just right. Then do it all over again.

“You seem nervous,” my research assistant ventures.

“More like terrified,” I reply.

“It’ll be ok,” she offers.

“I know it’ll be ok,” I say, chuckling a bit flippantly. “I’m about to jump off a bridge—I’d be worried if I wasn’t scared at this point.” Then I go back to my chopsticks.

When we meet back up with the guys, Jeremy goes through the pack job with me, wanting to be sure I am comfortable with the gear he is lending me. My stomach is in my throat! After inspecting the gear and approving Jeremy’s pack job, I don his rig. Before we step onto the bridge itself, we practice the climbover and exit, over and over; we aren’t going anywhere until I get it right. “Keep your head high,” Jeremy says fifteen times. I concentrate on this and nothing else. My only job on this exit is to leave in good body position. “Fuck the horizon,” said Cohen, another jumper. “That’ll keep your head and chest high automatically.”

Finally satisfied with my launch, Jeremy says: “Let’s head to the exit.” I look like a deer in headlights—of that I have no doubt. We walk to the exit, talk (again) about the wind conditions, the landing area, the obstacles, and the outs (especially the river). Jeremy says, “don’t forget—clothes dry faster than bones heal.”

As instructed, I spit over the edge of the bridge, watching my spittle fall away, its drift telling me about wind direction and strength. After struggling to generate enough spit for a second time, I get the same result. Before putting my helmet on, I wipe the sweat from my brow and rub the bridge of my nose methodically, wishing for a drink of water as I do so. We do a final gear check, and Jeremy readies my pilot chute. "Ready when you are."

From that moment on, I don’t notice a single car crossing the bridge. There are hundreds, no doubt, but I am not aware of even one. I am so focused on the railing, and on what I have to do, that everything else disappears. My heart is like a jackhammer in my chest! I grip the railing as hard as I can, my heavy breathing deafening me as I do so. I ease one leg up and over, (unnecessarily) pinching the railing between my legs, terrified of what might happen if my grip loosens. Hugging the railing as I roll over, I focus on turning in the right direction: toward, rather than away from Jeremy. Once I am over the rail, I have both feet back on the bridge, but the space looks so much smaller from this side! I am generally quite comfortable with heights, but it seems as if I will plummet if I move one centimeter in the wrong direction. Mouth parched, I take my time getting a good grip with both hands, shifting first one hand then the other in the tiniest of movements. My legs
bounce a little, almost imperceptibly, much as they did at the point of exhaustion when I used to rock climb. As I look down (which I had just been instructed NOT to do), the edges of the canyon compress inward and the bridge shifts slightly in my vision. Looking back up, I make an effort to breathe through my nose. *Fuck the Horizon.* I take a deep breath, look forward, and say “3, 2, 1, see ya.” (This makes it sound as if I am as cool as a cucumber, but I am merely repeating what I’ve heard other BASE jumpers say.)

I bend my knees slightly, anticipating the “point of no return” of which other jumpers have spoken. As I extend my legs and begin to launch, I feel it. Though my weight is moving off of the bridge, the balls of my feet, light as air, are still in contact with the hard concrete. In real time, there is the briefest moment of total peace, and yet it seems to stretch on forever. Calmness. Clarity. There is no more anticipation, no more “what if?”; I am about to answer the “what if?” one way or another. Then the peace is shattered by the onset of freefall. Time goes from being distended to tremendously compressed as I accelerate away from the bridge, my mind going into business mode: *Good launch—chest high. There’s the bridle going taut. There’s the pin, the container opening, line stretch, and an inflated parachute flying on heading.* As I reach up to feel the familiarity of toggles in my hands, business mode is interrupted by the realization that I have been yelling something at the top of my lungs: “MOTHER FUCKER!”

I chuckle a little bit as I recover my sense of time, and have the weirdest thought, as if I am outside of myself watching: *everything’s fine, maybe you should replace that sound with something more celebratory.* I whoop and holler as loud as possible. As I approach the landing area, I revel in the familiar feeling of a parachute responding to toggle input. I turn to face into the wind for landing, flare, and almost run past the camera that happens to be there for a media event. Ignoring the camera crew, I breathe deeply, then daisy-chain my lines, slowly looking around me at the landing area, the river, the obstacles, and the bridge itself. *This is not going to be a one-shot deal.*

**Relational Risk**

Carly and I sit in our living room, which sometimes acts as a second office for each of us. I anxiously await her assessment of a recent version of this paper, about which I feel quite vulnerable.

Carly looks up from reading, pondering her thoughts. Finally she ends the suspense, saying, “I like it. Initially, I wasn’t familiar with autoethnography, so I didn’t know exactly what I should be looking for.” She pauses, her lips curling into a relaxed smile. “Now, though, I get it. I get what you’re doing. I get the story you’re telling. It’s not just about BASE jumping, as you initially thought it might be. And your ‘so what?’ question is clearer to me now.”

The phone rings. As Carly turns to answer it, she glances at me over her shoulder, fixes me with her piercing brown eyes, and says “Is it clearer to you?”

I sit there reflecting on Carly’s question, and on writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). As I have written this paper, I have come to realize that BASE is only part of the story. Like much of my recent work, this story comes from my sense that work on voluntary risk-taking often lacks a critical consideration of dimensions like gender and class, although that’s starting to be
addressed more meaningfully (e.g., Laurendeau, 2008, Laurendeau & Adams, 2010; Fletcher, 2008; Lois, 2001; Olstead, 2011; Robinson, 2004; Thorpe, 2009). It is also, though, a response to Giulianotti (2009), who argues that sociologists of sport might benefit from a more sustained engagement with different ways of theorizing risk. Although some people (e.g., Donnelly, 2004; McDermott, 2007; Safai, 2003) are already doing this, I think Giulianotti’s right when he says we could be doing more.

Carly comes back into the room, smiling broadly. “Mom and Dad say hi,” she says as she twirls her hair in that way she does when she’s working something through. Two wraps around her index and middle fingers, then her thumb rubs first the left side, then the right. “So, I’ve been thinking about your paper,” she says tentatively.

“You have, have you?” I reply, playfully. “You’re gorgeous when you’re being smart, you know.”

She smirks. “Just when I’m being smart?” She pauses, giving me time to (re) focus on the paper. “I agree with Carolyn (Ellis) that it feels like you have multiple stories here. And the challenge, she quite rightly points out, is to figure out the one you want to tell, and then tell it simply and directly.”

“You’re right,” I concede. “I’ve really struggled with focusing this piece.”

“I think I can help there,” Carly offers. “The more I think about it, the more it sounds to me like it’s principally about one thing—what one of your reviewers called ‘relational risk.’”

“Ok,” I say, tentatively. “I hadn’t really thought of putting it that way before that review. What do you think the reviewer was getting at?”

“To me, it sounds like part of the conversation you were trying to engage in when you wrote about the intersection of risk and responsibility (Laurendeau, 2008). I think what you were saying is that too much of the work on voluntary risk activities neglects attention to social actors’ other identity projects, relationships, and responsibilities.”

“Or tends to devote too little attention to these things,” I offer. “Though, recently, Leon Anderson, for instance, has pushed in this direction somewhat (Anderson, 2011).”

Carly pauses thoughtfully. “So, do you see how you’re doing that here?”

“I think so,” I begin, tentatively. “Let me take it out for a spin, and you can see what you think. In this story, I illustrate that relationality through a consideration of my gender project.” I pause, considering where to go from there. “My pro-feminist politics (see Laurendeau, 2004, Laurendeau & Sharara, 2008, Laurendeau & Adams, 2010) have sometimes existed in an uneasy tension with the ways in which I “do” masculinity (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009). These tensions have been most evident in my engagement in sporting practices of various kinds, as I have “played” with and through injuries (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Pringle & Markula, 2005) and embodied a version of masculinity that privileges competitiveness and risk-taking (Pringle & Hickey, 2010).”

“Good,” Carly says. “What is the story about? How do you illustrate the idea that risk is something we negotiate in relation to other people, identities, relationships?”
I pause, exhaling slowly, buying time to formulate an answer. “The story is about my gender project and those tensions as they manifested themselves in BASE. I want to delve into the ‘layering, the potential internal contradiction, within all practices that construct masculinities’ (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 852).”

“Ok,” Carly says after a slight pause. “You’ve told me that there are a number of approaches to autoethnography. What’s your tack in this paper?”

“My approach is informed by a number of concerns that autoethnography might help me address. First, it forces me to be much more reflexive, locating myself (and my body) squarely in the text and the analysis (Giardina & Newman, 2011). Second, it should help capture the sensuality of the embodied experience on the “edge” (Evers, 2006). Third, it might help me trouble truth claims and push disciplinary boundaries (Adams, 2011a; Rinehart, 2010; Silk & Andrews, 2011). Carolyn (Ellis, 2004) and Meg (Popovic, 2010, in particular, helped me wrap my head around the notion of polyvocality as a potentially productive approach. Inspired by Meg, I aim to write into that space of uncertainty, to face ‘imposter syndrome’ head on, to create something intelligible and meaningful from the many voices that inform my sociological project (Popovic, 2010, personal communication).”

“Ok, I’m with you,” Carly begins. “That sounds more like methodology than methods. Shouldn’t you tell readers how many jumps you did, how many hours you spent in the field, interviews, etc?”

“No,” I reply, a bit too defiantly. “And yes. My point here is not to make a truth claim about BASE jumping or jumpers, but to construct a narrative that sheds light both on this social world and on risk-taking, masculinity and emotion. So my twenty-four jumps, numerous formal and informal interviews, and hundreds of hours ‘in the field’ are relevant in that they hopefully help take readers into the experience and better understand my stories. Conversely, I do not subscribe to the notion that various sources can be triangulated to validate one another as they converge on an objective reality that is knowable, even imperfectly (Guba & Lincoln, 2004).”

“Ok,” Carly says, looking me square in the eye. “I think you know what you need to do to take this to the next level. Go do it.”

“If You’re Reading This...”

Once I jumped, I couldn’t stop thinking about doing it again, about learning to do it on my own. I genuinely love the feeling of being scared by something, facing that fear, and jumping into it. There’s a kind of confidence that comes from that, one that translates into other areas of my life (Lyng, 1990). There’s more though. I’d be lying if I said I don’t get off on other people telling me I’m crazy for the stuff I do. I’m the one who will jump out of something, off of something, or just climb the stone fireplace at a ski chalet while a bunch of friends are having an impromptu dance party below, and this has become part of my masculine identity (Olstead, 2011). So, a few months after my first jump, I am off to Idaho again to learn not only how to do a BASE jump, but how to be a BASE jumper.

After 14 hours of driving and a fitful night of sleep, I meet Cam at a diner he likes for breakfast. There is the usual small talk while we eat—how was the drive, catching up on jumpers we both know. I wolf down my breakfast and eagerly engage with him, both because I like him and because I can’t wait to learn what he has to teach me. Soon, we are down to business. Not the business of how to jump.
The business of “you had better be sure this is what you want.” Cam presents his well-rehearsed spiel:

Expect to get injured. And seriously injured means a stay in the hospital. You can avoid getting killed, but the only way to be sure is to walk away. You will also become great friends with some very good people, you’ll share great experiences with them, and then you will watch them die. You can count on that. And you may very well die yourself.

None of what he is saying is news, and I don’t have much of a reaction. Perhaps that should be a red flag. But it isn’t. Or maybe I am just prepared to ignore red flags. Or maybe a red flag means multiple things to me; it could be both a warning and an enticement (Popovic, personal communication). Cam proceeds to recount various gruesome injuries and deaths in the sport. *I get it, I get it. I could get hurt. I could get killed. Got it. Now, when do we jump?* Next, Cam gets me to write a letter to my family, explaining to them that I have died:

Dear Mom, Dad, Jenn, Jacquie and Matthew,

If you’re reading this, it’s because I’ve died doing a BASE jump. First of all, please understand that this was my choice. Nobody coerced me into participating in this sport. It’s hard for me to describe to you why I chose to take these risks, but suffice it to say that jumping made me feel more alive than anything else. It taught me things about myself that I could learn nowhere else. Please understand that I fully understood the risks of the sport and accepted them as part of my participation.

I’m sorry to be putting you through this ordeal. Honestly, the risk to myself was not the most difficult part for me to make sense of. The toughest part of this is the knowledge that I might subject you to the kind of ordeal you now face. Know that I love all of you, and will miss you terribly. If I haven’t had this conversation with you in person, I deeply apologize for that. I am afraid to do so, but I will do my best to suck it up and talk to you about this. I want to ask you not to blame anyone else for this. This is not the fault of any other jumper, instructor, or anyone else, and it would disappoint me greatly if they were to get dragged into this in any way.

There is little more I can say at this point. I hope that this helps you all, in some small way, to understand what I’ve done and why I did it, and to make some sense of my death.

Please understand that this is not about how I died, but about how I lived.

I love you all,

Jay (letter written in August, 2007)

In this letter, I am saying what I am “supposed” to say, but I am so taken up with the excitement of jumping that I am not really checked in with Cam or what he is saying. My letter implies that I am willing to die for what I got out of BASE. Bullshit!! Though some of the jumpers I interviewed spend a great deal of time
thinking of this, and have come to the conclusion that the risks are worth it, that is not me. As I write this letter to my family, I still don’t think I could die. In skydiving, I thought I’d be safe because I was young, fit and coordinated. As I embark on my BASE career, I am no longer as young, or as fit, or as coordinated as I once was. As I listen to Cam recount stories of deaths and injuries in BASE though, I think I am smart enough to make choices that won’t put me in that position (see Laurendeau, 2006). I even say to Cam during the course that I am glad to be doing this in my 30s; I don’t feel a need to prove anything, so I am more measured in my choices. Clearly, though, I’m not listening. “The only way to be sure is to walk away.” But I don’t walk away. At least not yet.

This letter also illustrates a self-absorption that troubles me. Though I point out my difficulty in coming to terms with the effect my death would have on my family, once again I am not checked in. Though I don’t think I will die in BASE, I clearly understand this to be a possibility. And yet there’s little evidence in the letter that I take my responsibilities to and for loved ones terribly seriously (Laurendeau, 2008; Olstead, 2011). Cam’s practice of having student jumpers write this letter is perhaps illustrative of a “risk culture” (see Donnelly, 2004) in which individuals and organizations seek to protect themselves from potential legal problems. Particularly in light of the content and tone of my letter, this is somewhat ironic.

As I worked on an earlier version of this paper, I shared it with my mother, who said that my “letter’ really wouldn’t have cut it...” She pointed out that my death would have hit my grandmother the hardest, and would have left everyone with unanswered questions. And yet, my myopia allows me to jump with a relatively clear conscience. For a while, at least.

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Pirkko and Mike are right. Your descriptions of the jumps are better, but you (still) miss some opportunities to flesh out this idea of relational risk. Look at that last section. You’ve written a letter to your family explaining that you’ve died! And you still don’t talk about them (enough). Ironically, you talk about the self-absorption in that letter in a self-absorbed way. The point is that you didn’t think about them, about their emotions, about the heartache they would experience if you got killed, the survivor guilt, the unanswered questions (Ellis, 1993). You didn’t think you’d get killed in the sport. Fine. But what if you had been wrong?

“The Chief”

“I’m gonna’ jump off a cliff!” I announce to my deviance class. I am sharing my excitement for research with my students. But let’s be honest. Part of what I am doing—and what I find myself succumbing to a bit more often than I’d like to admit—is trying to seem “cool” to a bunch of teenagers and twenty-somethings (though my use of “cool” likely dates me and betrays that I am not, in their eyes, whatever the word-du-jour is).

My pending trip is exciting for a host of reasons. My research is going well, I get to head to Squamish (an outdoor adventure destination about an hour’s drive from Vancouver, British Columbia) at the drop of a hat, and my grant will pay for
it! On top of that, now that I’ve completed the BASE course, I feel more confident in doing more challenging jumps. “The Chief”\(^{16}\) will be my first cliff, and hence represent progress for me as a jumper (Fletcher, 2008). True, I am still a neophyte, and will need assistance from a more seasoned jumper, but I am on my way.

Having set out well before dawn, Axel (a local jumper) and I arrive at the trail-head in the dark. Yesterday, when the winds had been too high for us to jump, Axel showed me the landing zone, a little construction area separated from the Chief by a busy highway. Power lines around the area, but a nice big open “runway” if you fly a smart landing pattern. All that’s left now is to hike to the exit, talk about the launch, and then do it. The Chief is different from my previous jumps. This is a 1500-foot cliff, but because of the rock formation, it is only “300 feet to impact,” as Axel put it. It is also the first time “object strike”\(^17\) feels like a real possibility.

As we hike to the exit, my legs and lungs sear from the physical effort of the steep hike while carrying my gear, and my mind races with excitement and apprehension.

“You feeling OK?” Axel asks for a third time. “Nervous at all?”

“You’re out of ten,” I lie, both to myself and to him.

We arrive at the exit, a small precipice overlooking the waters of Howe Sound and the peaks of Tantalus range beyond. “Once I’m ready, I’ll let you know,” Axel starts. “You move forward to this spot, right here. DO NOT walk over here without gear on. I fuckin’ hate when guys do that – it freaks me out.”

“Not a problem,” I say, and mean it.

“When we’re ready, line yourself up with that peak,” he continues. “Now, when you’re open,\(^{18}\) once you’re happy with everything, hang a ninety left right away. You can fly right along this gorgeous cliff face for a good long while. Just make sure to cross the highway above 500 feet so you don’t freak drivers out too much.”

“Got it,” I reply, thinking about the phrase “300 feet to impact.”

“How about now?” Axel asks again. “How are you feeling about everything?”

“I’m pretty freakin’ scared, actually.” There’s no point in lying, I figure. First of all, I’m sure it’s written all over my face. Second, I am trusting this guy with my life, literally. Why would I be anything but honest with him?

“Glad to hear it,” he replies thoughtfully. “The guys I bring up here who aren’t scared, or tell me they aren’t scared, are the ones I worry about.”

I do a final gear check, caressing my container with my fingertips as I do so. I look around the exit area, but not beyond the edge of the cliff, and don my helmet. I feel a bit like Darth Vader, the sound of my breathing pounding in my ears. I measure each step as I move steadily, but slowly, into position in front of Axel, still six feet from the cliff’s edge. I feel slight tugs on my container as Axel checks my gear, extracts my pilot chute from its sleeve, and folds it and my bridle in preparation for “short-lining”\(^{19}\) me.

“Ready,” says Axel, and I feel complete trust in this man I met only twenty-four hours earlier. He doesn’t say a word to me as I inch forward, listening to the scratching of pebbles on the cliff as I grind them into the ground. I work myself into position, looking only at the rock in front of me. There, that’s solid. Yup, solid. Now breathe. Look to that peak on the horizon. Breathe. “3,2,1, see ya.”
As I launch my weight over the edge, I catch my breath just like I do on a hike, when I crest a saddle and a whole new valley opens up in front of me. Then the stillness ends, and I’m falling. *Bridle. Pin. Wow—that cliff is fucking close! Line stretch. Canopy inflated and on heading. TURN LEFT!!*

I turn, and the granite monolith is forty feet away, stretching below me forever. I turn slight left, flying closer and closer, until it feels like the edge of my canopy is only a few feet away from the cliff face. I can’t take my eyes off of it, wanting to scorch it into my memory forever. I am alone in the world, it seems, in the very best sense.

Suddenly, over my right shoulder, I hear: “How awesome was that?” I turn and glance at Axel, set against the backdrop of Mount Sedgwick, bathed in the early-morning light. Having jumped a few seconds after I did, he is now flying just a few feet away.

“How awesome was that?” I answer, tasting the inadequacy of the words.

“Freaking amazing!” he says. “But make sure to cross the highway above 500 feet.” I listen carefully, both because I want to be safe and because I want Axel’s approval. I look around, making sure I still have time to “play.” *How many people have had a view like this?* I smile with my whole heart as I live this moment.

Finally, I have no choice but to pull myself away from the wonder of the cliff face. I apply light pressure to my right toggle, greeting my canopy as if it is a familiar friend. By the time I flare and land, Axel has landed, taken his helmet off, and is holding his camera in his hands, filming my landing.

I am oblivious to Axel and his camera, though, as I turn to look up at the Chief. I stand, slack-jawed, rubbing my closely-shorn, balding head, taking in the preceding five minutes. My reverie is interrupted by the sound of gravel under tires, giving away the approach of a pickup truck carrying two well-tanned and muscled construction workers.

“Did you guys just jump off that fucking cliff?!” the passenger asks as the truck rolls to a stop. My lips part slightly, and an unself-conscious smile takes possession of my face. “Yup,” I reply, looking him in the eye.

He exclaims, “that’s fucking awesome!!”

Axel places the camera on the hood of the truck, and the four of us gather around it, watching in silence as the video shows me falling away from the cliff face, and Axel following shortly behind. The construction workers’ respect, and Axel’s approval, are palpable as we huddle together around the tiny screen (see Donnelly & Young, 1988). I have been granted (temporary) access to the hub of hegemonic masculinity from which I have generally been excluded, and which I so often critique. I shift my weight, standing ever so slightly taller.

**Antenna**

My first 23 jumps had all been legal.20 I encounter my first illegal jump in October 2007. (Actually, as is often the case, it is not the jump that is illegal, but the trespassing involved.) This is also the most demanding jump I’ve done in the sense that the antenna is only 220 feet high. Though I’ve heard of experienced jumpers doing objects much lower than this, this is by far my lowest to date. Assuming my parachute opens quickly and on-heading, I will barely have time to turn into the
wind for landing. Whereas object strike was my big fear on the cliff, altitude (or lack thereof) is my worry on this night.

We wait for a break in traffic (the antenna is located near a major highway), and shimmy under a little gap in the fence, my heart racing, seduced by breaking the law. I am surprised at how physically taxing it is to climb the antenna. My forearms are screaming by the time we reach the top of the long, cramped ascent up an enclosed ladder. And the sound of my rig rubbing up against the enclosure seems deafening. We are out here at about 2 am (to avoid the police), and I am freezing by the time we reach the top of the ladder and step onto the platform.

As I don my rig and adjust my leg straps, I am somewhat distracted. I glance at the field below, and spot one of my best friends, with whom I have always wanted to share this experience. And yet, even with Roger’s presence, I do not feel “amped” about this jump. Jeff spends twenty minutes meticulously preparing the equipment on the outer rail, explaining what he’s doing as he goes. I don’t seem to care. Let’s just do this. Eventually, we jump into the cold night air, landing in the field below. I whoop and holler, but it is not entirely heartfelt.

As I wrote this paper, I came to understand the flatness of that last jump: Rosco. Rosco is our gorgeous nine year-old Husky cross, sitting at my feet on the couch as I scribble in the margins. He’s a bit out of sorts today because of a thunderstorm underway. I left the office to be with him because he is one of my best friends and I love him. He and I have bonded over hiking, spooning, wrestling, and table scraps for years. And yet, that night in October 2007, I abandoned him. He had a run-in with a porcupine that night, and needed surgery to have the quills removed. The vet assured me that Rosco wouldn’t wake up for hours, so I knew he wouldn’t miss me if I left to jump the antenna. So, I did. But that’s not how I’m put together. Maybe BASE did teach me about myself. It taught me that I had, in fact, lived through my Ph.D., and come out the other side with a passion for life. And it taught me that I could still look fear in the face and decide to jump anyway. But on that night, I allowed it to distract me from what really mattered. What mattered was that “my boy” was going through an ordeal at a vet’s office.

Kairotic Moment

It’s 4:43am, July 25, 2011. I sit on the couch, writing this section (what Ellis, 2004 would call an “interlude”) for the third time. I keep looking at the decision letter I received from the editors a couple of hours ago: “You switch to a more realist tale from [this point] on and therefore, this final part appears somewhat disconnected from the rest of the paper.” They’re right. So far, there’s a lot of showing, as I really try to draw readers into the jump experience. From here on, there’s a bit more telling, though I still try to show quite a bit. But shouldn’t I be showing AND telling? Don’t they accomplish slightly different things (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010)? Yes, I counter, but that doesn’t explain a marked shift in tone. I decide to sit in the “stuckness,” understanding it as a potentially productive space (Frentz, 2008).

From the stuckness, I wonder whether the shift in my paper is similar to that described by Adams (2011b). The tone to this point is immediate, focused. And
that is how I experienced the jumps. This story is about me growing into a broader awareness, reflecting more on who I am, what I mean to other people, and they to me. Though I didn’t intend it this way, perhaps the shift in the paper parallels the shift in my life as I moved away from BASE.

My Last One

As it turns out, my one and only antenna jump was also my last jump. The last notable turning point in my brief BASE career happened outside of the sport: I met Carly. Carly is not particularly impressed by parachutes or stories of being a bad boy. She is impressed by passion, vulnerability and honesty, and by people who love with abandon. And she is and does these things in spades.

Though my decision to leave BASE was cemented the day our son was born, it was a work in progress for the preceding sixteen months. BASE—or any serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007) pursuit—demands an enormous commitment of time and energy. With Carly and I forming a new relationship, and each of us negotiating the early stages of an academic career (see Ellis, 2011), BASE got shelved. And as was always the case with skydiving, the longer I went between jumps, the easier it was to ignore the itch to do another one. Carly and I rarely talked about BASE. It was something she didn’t necessarily understand or appreciate, but she knew that it was a path I had chosen, and that I had to work through its place in my life as we forged our new life together. Not that this “working through” happened actively, though. In fairly short order, the rewards I received from my participation in BASE seemed less important to me, less tangible. The intensity of emotion associated with a jump fades as the jump itself recedes into memory. The anticipation of another jump prolongs that process, but only for so long. The rewards of my relationship with Carly, on the other hand, were and are patently obvious.

At the same time, the risks of BASE suddenly had more weight to them, especially when Carly and I started talking about having a baby (see Laurendeau, 2008). The vast majority of jumpers I spoke to said they would have to think very seriously about whether to keep jumping if and when they have children. For me, and for other jumpers I spoke to, this is not a simple equation where a small child equals quitting BASE. I met a number of jumpers who continued jumping with children. It becomes one important part, though, of how you make sense (or don’t) of your participation. And in my case, it became the important part.

Dear Quinn

“This is a great review,” Carly said as we sat in our living room. She had just read a much earlier version of this paper, and Leon Anderson’s comments on it. He had congratulated me for transforming the paper and being genuinely reflexive, but also made it clear that the paper still didn’t have quite the focus it needed. “This is what I meant when I said it didn’t feel finished,” Carly added.

This is one of the many things I love about this woman—my first, most frequent, and most supportive reader. She challenges me to grow, both as a man and as a scholar, and does it in a way that never leaves me wondering whether she’s in my corner.
“Leon’s right,” she added, as I lost myself in those almond-colored eyes of hers, the same eyes that look at me from Quinn’s face. “You need to be clear about the story you want to tell, and I wasn’t sure I felt that at the end.”

Now, several months after this conversation, I ask the all-important question: “Have I told the story I want to tell?” Lost in this thought, I watch Rosco catch his breath on the floor of my office. I live for the way he looks at me, as if I am the one person who should know what he needs and be able to give it to him. Even more, I live for the way Quinn looks at me, in absolute wonder. There will come a time, I know, when his image of me becomes more tempered by the understanding that his father is fallible. For now, though, he is in awe of me. Not because I jump from anything, but because I love him completely, would do anything to put a smile on his face, to make him feel better when he’s sick, to help him learn to negotiate the world. And from the word go, I have been in awe of him. Most of all, I am “put together” by Carly. By the way she looks at me, by the way we feed each other emotionally and intellectually (see Ellis, 2011), and by the spoken and unspoken bonds that tie us to each other and to our “little one.”

I find myself wondering, from time to time, if I would have stayed with BASE had I been doing it longer before Carly and I met, and before Quinn came along. At the end of the day, though, I hadn’t. And at that point in my nascent BASE jumping career, there wasn’t enough tying me to the sport. I took every opportunity to do a jump over the course of those few months after my first one, but my commitment hadn’t been cemented by the time things shifted dramatically. The “durable benefits” (Stebbins, 2007) of BASE all but vaporized when I met Carly, and, even more so when Quinn was born. I still get excited (really excited!!) by watching a BASE film at the Banff Mountain Film Festival, for example. But the durable benefits in my life are to be found principally (though not exclusively) in my relationships with Carly, Quinn, and Rosco. I may never again experience the particular kind of emotionality that came with parachuting from a cliff. But that is not something that I carry around with me. What I carry around with me, what “puts me together,” is the sense of awe that accompanies my journey toward understanding myself as a man, a partner and a father.

As one reviewer pointed out, some communication scholars argue that in our most significant relationships, we struggle with what Baxter (1993) calls the Autonomy-Connection dialectic, which “refers to the basic contradictory tension between social solidarity or unity” (Baxter & Ebert, 1999, p. 548). This dialectic is worthy of further consideration by sport scholars, perhaps especially by those concerned with risk. “Risk sport” participants’ passions, choices and emotions must be considered in relation to who they understand themselves to be, and to be to and for others:

Dear Quinn:

One of the first times I met your mom, I was packing a parachute on my front lawn. I’m sure she thought I was nuts, but to me, it made all the sense in the world that I would be willing to jump from a bridge or a cliff. Until recently, those were the most intense emotional experiences I’d ever had. Not only were they exhilarating, but they helped me find a part of myself that I couldn’t find anywhere else.
I still get excited by the thought of doing a BASE jump. There was a time when I thought the potential price to be paid was worth it. You and your mom helped me understand that I’m no longer willing to take that chance. True, I could die doing just about anything, but the hazards were greater in BASE jumping. And that’s not a price I’m willing to pay at this stage of my life (and our lives together). After a number of years where I felt like I was searching for something, I am now thoroughly enjoying having found it, and that has everything to do with you and your mom.

Quinn, let me tell you about the minutes after you were born. While the doctors and nurses worked to check that you and your mom were all right, I basically stood there and cried. It was the happiest moment of my life. I’m not a religious guy, but there was something much bigger than me in the hospital room that day. There’s a great picture from that day of me looking at your mom, with my hand on her left cheek, my head turned a bit, a look of total awe on my face. I’ve seen a look kind of like that on my face one other time as I stared up at a mountain, but this one, my love, is the one that will stay with me forever.

You were the most amazing thing I’d ever seen. I stood there with my hand on your tiny chest and just felt you breathe, and bawled my eyes out. I could see right through your ribs, could almost watch the blood flowing through your veins as you were introduced to what must have seemed like such a harsh world. And I knew right then that it was our job to keep you safe. That moment is a huge part of why I sold my BASE gear last summer. I thought I’d feel sad doing that, but I really didn’t. It felt like I was selling something from a different lifetime.

I thought that BASE taught me some things about myself, and it did. I’ve learned far more in the last few years from the hours your mom and I spent talking about our lives, what we wanted from ourselves and from each other. We talked about this stuff as we hiked together, traveled together, worked together, you name it. I’ve also learned them from watching you as you negotiate the world and figure out how your body works, who you can trust, and that we will always be there to celebrate your successes and help you up when things don’t go according to plan. And I couldn’t have learned those things by jumping from a bridge.

With all of my love,

I love you, beautiful boy…

Dad (letter first composed in October, 2009)

Coda

In my dream, Carly and I have just done the hike up the Chief. We wander over to the point from which I jumped many years earlier. As we stand in each other’s arms, Carly leans in and says “Do you remember coming here in 2008 on our road trip?”

“I do,” I say, pondering that day. “You couldn’t believe I had jumped from here.”

“I still can’t, in some ways,” Carly says, smirking.
“Where was Rosco?” I ask. “I don’t remember him being with us on the hike.”
“Remember, we decided to leave him at a kennel just before we got to Vancouver. Then we went to pick him up, and he was crying for us, but they weren’t open yet.” Her eyes glisten as she remembers Rosco. Mine do as well, as my heart aches.
“You knew, by the time we came here in ’08, that you wouldn’t do another jump,” she says, more as a statement than as a question.
“I think you’re right; I did,” I reply. “And that was before we even talked about having ‘little Q.’”
Carly chuckles. “You know what he’d say right now, don’t you? ‘Dad, I’m not little anymore.’” She pauses. “Do you ever worry that you stopped jumping for us?”
“Nope,” I reply, calmly. “I didn’t stop for you. Or for him. I stopped because the emotions I experience with you and with him are more satisfying for me than any jump ever was.” We sit silently for a few minutes, taking in the majesty of the scene before us. “Let me put it another way,” I venture. “One of the things I most loved about jumping was that I was wholly present in the moment; there wasn’t another thing I could have had my mind on, even if I wanted to. As I fell in love with you, and later, with him, that changed. Totally. I couldn’t imagine standing on the edge of a cliff and not thinking about you two, about what you were doing, about how much I love you. That was part of how I was growing at that time, and part of my gender project as well.”
A contented silence surrounds us for several minutes. “He’s really growing up, isn’t he?” Carly says wistfully.
“He is,” I say, grinning ear to ear. “He’s magic.”

Notes

1. Readers can think of these comments as memos written to myself at various stages of the research project, and shared to illustrate the messiness of the research enterprise, and the development of my ideas and perspectives throughout this process. Some (like the italicized comments in this opening vignette) are based on conversations I’ve had with myself, whereas others are loosely based on real conversations with family, friends and colleagues throughout this project. The voices from which these memos come are not unlike those described by Ellis (2011).
2. In this paper, I use real names for family and friends, and pseudonyms for BASE jumpers.
3. A “static line” is one method a BASE jumper uses to deploy his/her parachute. It is generally employed on very low jumps as it results in a very fast parachute opening.
4. As I explain in more detail below, Rosco is my dog, and was at the vet the night I jumped this antenna.
5. I use the term “death camp” here with some caution. As one reviewer pointed out, any comparison between a bridge jump and the Holocaust is problematic, to say the least. I elected to keep the term—which jumpers use to refer to particular methods of teaching new BASE jumpers the most basic elements of the activity—both because it is the way in which BASE jumpers employ it, and because it illustrates the sometimes macabre ways in which both skydivers and BASE jumpers make reference to the very real possibilities of grievous injury or death in the activities.
6. “Exit” is the term base jumpers use to refer to the specific spot from which they launch. Particular cliffs, for example, have numerous locations conducive to jumping, and, hence, numerous exits.
7. An “out” is a backup landing area to be used in the event that the main landing area is not suitable (especially if one is unable to reach the main area safely).
8. As it happens, I followed this advice on one of my later jumps there.
9. A pilot chute is essentially a mini-drogue that (in most cases) begins the sequence of deploying one’s parachute. It creates drag, pulling a piece of webbing (a “bridle”) that both opens a jumper’s container and extracts his/her parachute, which then inflates.

10. Toggles are handles on the end of the steering lines.

11. As one reviewer pointed out, though “this is a common curse word, it is a word with sexist connotations.” Thus, I use it both because it was the word that I used at the time (shamefully), and to illustrate some of the contradictions in my gender project. I explore these contradictions in greater depth below.

12. Flaring involves bringing both toggles down together. This creates drag, and converts the forward speed of the parachute into lift, slowing the parachute’s descent for a soft landing (at least in principle).

13. “Daisy-chaining” is a method of collecting suspension lines that prevents them from becoming tangled.

14. This was before I met Carly, and long before we had our son Quinn.

15. Drs. Pirkko Markula and Michael Giardina, Editor and Associate Editor of SSJ, respectively.

16. This peak has recently been the catalyst for controversy in Squamish. After two recent operations to rescue base jumpers who had been stranded on the cliff face, Squamish mayor Greg Gardner went on record calling for base jumping from the chief to be banned. He cited, among other things, unpredictable winds at this location. (see http://www.ctvbc.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20100803/bc_base_jumping_1008003?hub=BritishColumbiaHome, accessed May 24, 2011).

17. “Object strike” refers to a BASE jumper hitting an object (often that from which she/he has just jumped) either in freefall or under canopy.

18. “Open” refers to having a deployed (and, implicitly, fully functional) parachute.

19. Short-lining involves one jumper holding on to the other’s bridle and pilot chute as the second jumper falls away. This results in a very fast opening.

20. Though there seems to be a common perception that most base jumps are illegal, this is not the case, strictly speaking (Cooper & Laurendeau, 2007). Many cliffs (including the Chief) are legal to jump, and there are sometimes arrangements for objects to be legally jumped for limited times. The most well known example of the latter phenomenon is the event known as “bridge day,” held every year in at the New River Gorge Bridge in Fayetteville, West Virginia (see http://www.officialbridgeday.com/). In addition to objects that are legal for limited times, there are some, like the “Perrine,” that are legal to jump year-round.

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