

Matthew Miniati

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Leap of Faith

It's no secret that everyone has at least one embarrassing moment they have to live with for the rest of their life. It could be that moment you ask your crush to the dance or when you were asked to tell a hard truth. Heck, better yet, how about the moment you decided whether or not to jump off of a narrow metal platform 40 meters above waters below freezing temperatures. For me, it was the latter.

It happened on a family vacation in 2006, where we decided to visit New Zealand. It was my mother's idea, since she wanted us to see the Hobbit holes they created for the movie series, "The Lord of the Rings." After visiting them, we heard about the Auckland Harbour Bridge and thought we could take some great family photos there. When we went there and they said they had a program involving bungee jumping, my brother, Scott, couldn't resist signing us up. His younger siblings, Dana and I, were not so enthusiastic.

I stood, 11 years old, on the cold, metal ledge. Cold wind bit at my face and the winter breeze weaved itself through my wool clothing. I could smell saltwater and feel the cold mist of the waves as they crashed into one another. I looked out before me, looking around for anything that might stop me from making a clean drop underneath the bridge. Above me was the bridge's underbelly and 40 meters below me was the ocean's blue-green foamy waves. I desperately wished to waddle back to safety with the bungee gear wrapped around my legs, but the instructor would not let me pass.

"C'mon Matt! You can do it!"

"Stop being a little wuss and jump already!"

I looked back to see my brother and sister eagerly awaiting my plummet to death from the sidelines. I knew that if my mother and father weren't there we would have a much more vulgar exchange.

My brother was the first to go, fearless as usual. My sister was still pink-skinned from her own jump. Instead of diving off, she jumped feet first, which resulted in the body snapping downward headfirst at the bottom. While my brother succeeded in unlatching and freeing himself so that his body could perform as the ragdoll it was supposed to be, my sister did not and ended up becoming the human example of bait tied to a fishing lure.

Even before I was at the edge of the bungee platform, worst-case scenarios were already playing on repeat in my head. The reason why this specific platform was so foreboding was if someone became too anxious to move or jump, the instructors simply collapsed the platform underneath them. Of course, they can only do that if the client had fully consented to the jump. They thought it was a joke at the time when they dropped another guest while I continued to picture myself on it. Ten minutes later and I could have claimed to be the soothsayer of New Zealand.

After preparing me, the bungee instructors guided me to what I thought was my ultimate doom. I peered over the edge when the wind lashed, resulting in me stumbling back like a clumsy penguin and landing with a resounding metal clang. As both parents and instructors gasped, I did what any 11-year-old who was terrified of heights would do: I screamed.

“I don’t want to go! Please don’t make me go! I’ll- I’ll be good! I don’t want to die! Don’t make me jump off the cliff and die! I don’t want to! I don’t!”

My words soon turned into incoherent sobs and I continued my pleas even after they escorted me off of the ledge. The air of happiness and excitement immediately turned into embarrassment and silence except for my screams of agony.

They helped me out of the gear while I quaked in my boots and I was guided inside the Auckland Harbour Bridge interior. Surrounded by glass windows and metal scaffolding, I felt much safer without the wind and water rubbing up against my wet and sticky face. The crew gave me an ice pack for the back of my head for when I fell backward, hoping that I did not have a concussion or any injuries while in their care. My mother stayed with me inside while the rest watched the last of the clientele do what I could not.

My brother knew my head wasn’t hurt. That was my reasoning for why he wouldn’t stop pestering me about it. I asked him why he wouldn’t let it go years later, but his only response was, “It’s because I’m your older brother. I’m supposed to tease you; you know?” My sister soon joined him though, so whenever we had an argument during the rest of the trip in New Zealand, the nickname “bungee chump” acted as their trump card. Even my father looked a little disappointed by the fact that I wasn’t able to bungee jump. My mother said that it was ok since I was only a little kid; she thought perhaps it was a bit too much for me at my age.

However, this moment of hesitation tended to stay locked into my mind, vividly replaying itself at random ever since. The first instance was early in middle school, when I wanted to ask a crush out to dance. On the curb, where our parents pick us up from school, I witnessed her walk across the street to her own car. I immediately followed after and raised my hand to get her attention. Suddenly, the world went out of focus. The gap between the two sidewalks of the curb grew long and there was a bottomless black tar river below her car. She asked if I was Ok after I crossed the road, probably because it looked like I tripped over myself. “H-hey...” Is the farthest I got before creating an excuse to walk away. I choked, and resumed to spend the rest of the weekend beating myself up.

Fear still reared its ugly mug multiple times throughout my school life. Failure soon became critical to me, not just in academics, but socially as well. I didn’t want to fail to jump in front of my classmates and embarrass myself. This fear caused me to humble myself into corners of depression. Outside of school, things were not much different, as the ledge continued to haunt me.

The scene appeared again during a trip in Mexico. We were building houses for unfortunate families as part of a program connected to my family’s church. Some of my friends

forced me into a game of truth or dare and my crush from the dance just happened to be there as well. Desert dust and ash from the bonfires rode with the wind and into our eyes and lungs, forcing us to move further and further away from the center of the camp.

When I was selected for truth or dare by my oldest friend, Scott, I chose truth. “Do you like her?” Between telling the truth and lying, my choice of wildly running away into the desert from them seemed like a logical one at the time. My other best-friend, Ryan, tackled me to the ground before I got lost myself in the desert. I heard a loud metal clang when I landed. My teeth grinded against dirt and I tasted blood from chapped lips. Scratches and cuts on my arms and legs slowly warmed up in contrast to the cool air.

When asked why I ran, I couldn’t tell them and stared up at the stars, instead. Something told me to back up, to run, that she knew the answer and I knew her response. My fears were realized, whether I jumped at the chance or not. As I lay on the ground with contempt for the temporary traitors, I could smell a hint of salt water among the desert’s dunes.

I needed to tell someone about this, but I held back out of fear for being considered abnormal or mentally ill. I attempted to talk to my parents, but I didn’t fully disclose my strange behavior to them all at once, worried that I would become a hindrance or too strange in their eyes.

Since then, I have worked with four counselors; one as a small child, two for middle-school/high school, and a school counselor for college. We started in middle-school when my cautious and introverted behavior started affecting my academics and relationships with my parents and friends. But when it came to haunting bungee platforms, Dr. Tirk aided me the most. While the other counselors connected this as just a representation of my fear of heights and/or depression, Dr. Tirk saw it as a still framed-photo for my fear of failure.

Ever since I can remember, others have pointed out to me that I have the tendency to be too hard on myself with even the most mundane of mistakes. By having my brother and sister persistently tease me while I was also berating myself, I must have locked in the notion that I was considered alien to them.

Dr. Tirk traced this back to my failed jump at the Auckland Harbour Bridge after discussing it with my parents. “I’m,” My mother would say, “I mean, we accidentally took him on the wrong rollercoaster at Disneyland and have brought him with us on rainforest expeditions when he was even younger.” Although my fear of heights probably originated from somewhere else, the fear of failing in the eyes of my loved ones definitely stood out in this memory considering how ingrained it was.

“I need to fix this. I want to,” I told her. I honestly believed that seeing something like this every time I make an important decision would prove disastrous. I knew this was becoming a serious issue. As we had done with other situations; she listened, we took notes, and we found a solution.

Now, every time I freeze, I think about moving forward. I don’t ponder about what friends or family have done and what they did, I only think about what I would gain instead of what I would lose.

I couldn't go back to New Zealand to bungee jump again, not with airline ticket prices these days, but I have taken dives into new areas of my life, like how I arrived at an out of state university and I'm celebrating my 2-year-anniversary with my girlfriend. I have also climbed a 25ft. rope swing into a natural pool of water, ridden a mile-long zip-line (despite becoming stuck in the middle), and have experienced a Central American rodeo among a myriad of other experiences. Someday, though, I would like to take that leap again, not just to conquer it, but to thank it as well.

Having this kind of fear of failure has brought out some of the best and worst in me and if I could, I would thank everyone involved. Without this experience, I would not have experienced the anxiety or know how to deal with these kinds of emotional issues like I do today. Each step was a growing process for me, and to be honest, I don't think I would have left my hometown in Arizona if I didn't have this kind of fear. For without it, I would not be choosing to overcome it; I would have remained in my hometown, comfortable in my shoes rather than wanting to explore outside of my state. Without this fear of failure, I don't believe I would be able to create the same kind of relationships I have with people today as well.

If I could go back and change things, I don't believe I would. I enjoy my time here now; the: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Even though I was hard on myself and very self-critical, I always chose to see the best in others as a result. By believing the situation was a consequence of my actions, I felt that it was my sole responsibility to correct it. If others were involved, I assumed they were playing their part as best they could, and that I should strive even further for them. Now, I don't just strive for them, but I strive for myself and for those I truly care about. Having a fear of failure can restrict you, almost severely, but it is also that fear that can cause you to love them more as well and work harder for them than ever before.

THE END_

Author's Note

When I began writing about my experience and fears, I realized that I never spoke to anyone about this outside of my family and a few friends. Not even my significant other knows yet. After carefully weighing my options, I wanted to make sure I was correct with my age and the time and place for these events. My parents were able to confirm where and when I went to New Zealand as well as our general location for constructing the homes in Mexico. I attempted to discover more information regarding my middle school and high school experiences from friends and former classmates; however, most were either unavailable or held the same amount of knowledge as me. In regards to my former crush, we lost contact after high school.

When I talked to my brother and sister over the phone, they were surprised to hear that this had been an issue for me during high school. We discussed how the bungee jumps felt, how the weather looked, etc. Ultimately their memory actually was vaguer than mine was except for the actual jumping experience. It was interesting to see how my brother and sister, despite the amount of teasing they gave me back then, could count such an event with so little significance and I gave it more than it should have received in the first place. When I discussed this further with Dr. Tirk over the phone, she advised me that was not just a phobia of failure but how this phobia could create more miscommunication the larger it grows. Honestly I did not expect to combat this again after witnessing it end years ago. But, looking back on it as well as my other fears and problems, I never realized just how small all of them really were.

This article, compared to the others, is definitely my strongest and most confident piece. I know all of the images in my memories and I know all of the answers to my own interview questions. In article and especially article 3, I was very critical of myself to make sure I got every important fact or important piece of information in the paper. However, for article 1, I was confident in what happened to me, and had little reason to doubt my own memory. Perhaps that can be seen as an issue, for if I'm unable to doubt my own memories, it could be possible for me to pass on incorrect information in my hastiness. As for articles 2 and 3, this had the opposite effect, whether it was for lack of confidence or for lack of information I did not perform as well as I did with this article.

I have acted with honest and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not. – Matthew Miniati