

# Teaching People To Fly

by Will Ellwood

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On top of a twelve mile tower of rock which grew from the plane of heaven to far above the clouds sat a man in a white plastic garden chair. He was an old man, and his hair had gone gray years ago. He was sitting watching the sun rise when the first visitor walked out of the elevator. The old man did not recognize this person as one of the regular visitors.

“Can I help you?” said the old man.

“Not really,” said the visitor. “Although I suppose you could tell me which side is best to jump from.”

“Do you really intend to jump?”

“Sure. Why not? This is heaven isn't it? What reason is there that I shouldn't be able to fly? People say this is the best place to learn,” said the visitor.

“I really don't recommend jumping from here without a parachute.”

“Why? It won't kill me.”

“No, it won't kill you. It won't do anything lasting damage either if that's what you are going to ask next,” the old man was forced to admit.

“Then what reason is there that I should wear something as restrictive as parachute?”

“Oh, never mind. I am not going to be able to convince you. I have this conversation every time someone new arrives. The best side to jump from is next to where I am sitting.”

The visitor walked to the edge of the tower. He stretched his arms out as if he was a bird. He took a deep breath and then stopped.

“I won't die,” he said.

“You won't die,” said the old man. “Just jump already. There will be more people wanting to jump soon and you'll hold them up if you dither.”

The visitor leapt out from the side of the tower and dropped towards the clouds. The old man leaned out over the side and shouted, “buy me some breakfast will you,” but the visitor had already fallen from earshot.

It was the middle of the day when the visitor arrived at the peak of the tower again. He looked shaken and shamed. He had brought a parachute up with him this time. The old man was eating a salad

lunch that one of the regular fliers had brought him.

“You never told me that it would feel like death,” said the visitor.

“No. I only said that you wouldn’t die,” said the old man.

“Why didn’t you say?”

“I have tried. Honestly I have. But most people don’t listen, and they jump regardless of my warnings.”

“It was magical though. That feeling of weightlessness and the feeling of the air rushing past you. The sight of the tower passing by you at such a unbelievable speed. The sight of gliders flying on the horizon, circling on the winds was utterly magical,” said the visitor. “Can you teach me how to put this on? I want to learn how to fly.”

The old man stood up from his chair. “Of course I can.”

He started to put his own parachute on as well. “First you need to put it on like a backpack. Make sure all the straps are tight and firm. Then you need to do the same thing with the leg loops.”

The visitor started to put the parachute. “What do I do to use it? Do I pull a ripcord or something?”

“Yes, something like that. I’ll get to it,” said the old man, who looked over the visitor strapping themselves into the parachute. The old man found the pilot chute and gave it to the visitor.

“This bit is easy. You have in your hand the pilot chute. When you want to open the parachute throw that behind you,” said the old man.

“Is it that easy?” said the visitor.

“Not really. But you’ll pick it up.”

Just leaving the lift and walking towards the old man was Alyssa. She had a parachute already on. The old man waved her over.

“Hey Alyssa, can you just check over this parachute?” said the old man.

“Sure,” she said. Alyssa walked around the visitor examining them. “Looks good.”

“Then you are good to go,” said the old man. “Another person has taken the first steps in learning to fly.”

The visitor walked to the edge of the tower. “What I don’t understand,” said the visitor, “is why the pain when you hit the ground? Why can’t we just fly like angels?”

“Because without risk there is no reward,” said the old man.

The visitor started to count down from three until they jumped. The old man watched the visitor fall into the clouds.

“Are you going to jump today?” said Allyssa to the old man.

“Later, at sunset,” said the old man. “I have still got people to warn about the first jump, and people to teach how to fly.”

“Are you ever going to quit?”

“I don’t think so,” said the old man. “I enjoy the teaching as much as the flying.”

“Were you a flight instructor before you died?” said Allyssa.

“Sometimes I was. Mostly I inspected sewers in Coventry,” said the old man.

“Oh, who’d have thought?”

“You should jump soon if you want to get more than one jump done before dark,” said the old man.

Allyssa smiled and jumped from the tower. The old man took off his parachute and sat down. Just as he picked his plate up he saw someone he did not recognize come out of the elevator.

“Hello, can I help you?” he said.