

**You have to jump... there will always be a parachute... though it might not open when you thought... and you might land out of the circle**

Kathleen R. Smythe

Remarks on the occasion of the Roger A. Fortin Award

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I was 19 years old and my boyfriend had asked if I wanted to skydive. I did and I did not. Usually in that position, I do what promises to be exhilarating in the hopes that I will find out something more about myself and the world I live in. So on a spring day in central Ohio, I was in a small airplane circling corn fields.

With a static line parachute, I stepped out onto the strut of the airplane, affording a clear view of the thousands of feet between me and the ground, as six of my friends had done before. Gripping the bar above, I waited as the pilot called, “1, 1000, 2, 1000, 3, 1000, JUMP!.” Jump I did even though much in me rebelled, worried that this was the last foolish move I might make (there had been others...). The parachute did not open as it should have. The lines were twisted and so, like a complicated braid, I had to untwist them myself to get the parachute unfurled. Once it unfurled, my descent slowed and I began to drift quietly alone in vast space. It was a remarkably peaceful several minutes. Until the landing. My parachute landing was harsh, harsher than I thought it would be and we had practiced them for an hour in the morning. The ground came rushing up and even though I rolled correctly, the impact with the earth was startling. Nor did I land in the circle demarcated for there were winds and I weighed less than the average jumpee. But I don’t regret it, any of it.

My point this afternoon is not that we should all go to the nearest airfield and skydive. My point is that the reasons I jumped were driven by values. I often feel like I am standing on the airplane strut these days looking out into a sky without values, without morality, without courage.

These are profoundly unsettling times. And yet we have an advantage over our students in that we know something different than nuclear politics and extreme global weather. They do not. Our country's political (and tightly interwoven economic) system is coming to resemble a few African autocracies I have studied. And here in the Ohio River valley over the last year, we have gotten enough rain to blow past the average by 13 inches, 30% more than typical! That these two are occurring at once is not a coincidence. A sense of abundance and stability, false or not, that might have nurtured me as a child is far less pronounced.

We have to jump because no one knows exactly what to do and because we all need to practice loudly, visibly, boldly declaring our values even if it makes us very uncomfortable.

Today if you were to go to an airfield to skydive, a master jumper would jump with you, no more static lines, no more novice solo jumping. We can be master jumpers; risking with our students. But we jump not for the sake of risking; we jump for a set of values that will lead to a future that is not driven by short-term thinking, scarcity-, and fear-based decision-making. But for the sake of a vision that each one of us has, driven by our desires and passions, for something better and for something more humane.

I jumped out of that airplane 33 years ago because I valued (and value) wonder—what would it be like to float through the sky? Because I valued courage rather than comfort—I knew what it was like to be on campus on a Saturday but not to skydive. Because I valued my friends and loved my boyfriend—he wanted to share this experience with me, with us. I jumped because I love being outside and connected to it in as many different ways as possible. Particularly, I have

found that I feel most connected to people and places around me when I am at my most vulnerable.

In many ways, my time here at Xavier has been a fairly constant series of decisions to jump out of the airplane. Even before coming here, I went to a remote corner of Tanzania to learn a second African language in a community where I knew no one to answer questions that were only partially formed but that I now know were about being fully human.

The decision to come here at all was another jump. Some of you know this story and it is my honor to be able to briefly recall this with master jumper Roger Fortin and his family today. Back in 1997, I was pregnant for the first time and on the job market. After my conference interview, I was put on bedrest due to preterm labor and was unable to travel for the three campus interviews that had just been set up. The history department here, under Roger Fortin's leadership, encouraged me to "interview" anyway. I videotaped my lecture from the hospital bed, looking not unlike a beached whale and had several conference calls. For me, it was a way to pass the time; get some practice at interviewing; and exert a bit of control over circumstances that were out of my control. I felt there was no way I was going to be competition for flesh and blood candidates. As we all know now, I was wrong. But I had to accept the job without having been on campus as well; it was not a hard decision for me as the department had showed me compassion, creativity, and flexibility—all values that I knew I would need for a nurturing environment for my vocation.

Then there was trying to get tenure while raising two young children with a pilot husband who worked 20 out of 30 days a month. I was ill a lot, felt I was not doing much well, and found myself often reflecting on my feminist philosophy classes as an undergrad. The message of being able to "have it all" that I picked up felt dangerously incorrect. I slowly cobbled together my own sense of identity, work and family that frequently left me feeling inadequate but at least honored

the fact that I had to set priorities and live with the consequences rather than spin out in a blaze of glory trying to be superwoman. I worked part-time for a year before tenure; I took my children with me to Africa multiple times despite institutional resistance; I worked at a farm when I should have been writing; and I thoroughly enjoyed my summers.

Now, in a third “jump,” I find myself writing and teaching about things I was not directly trained in, across every kind of disciplinary and methodological boundary because I must understand how we got here, not just in the last several hundred years but over millennia. And I find myself trying to cultivate, experience and teach resilience through community in a First Year Seminar. My curiosity, deep concern for the future, and endless quest to understand myself and my species trumps my training.

All of this adds up to a vision of where we might go and how we might get there that drives me. I do not have all the answers, I might not have any of them and I am likely wrong but I won't be accused of being complacent! I have co-created with others across the AJCU an Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability that both informally and formally provides a structure for doing what I think is the most important thing I can do, give students the skills, experiences and framework to construct a values system and way of being they will need to counter the ways of proceeding that are destroying the planet and our humanity. There are five steps/themes to the Pedagogy and I will close by naming three of them with an example of how I make them come alive in my classes. The first is *Being honest with ourselves and our students and being co-learners with everyone; assuming a position of humility in the face of planetary challenges that remind us there are no simple answers*. I let students know I am frightened by the changing climate; that I often feel vulnerable and defenseless in the face of it. I mourn the loss of snow and ice skating. I also tell them that history teaches us that adaptation to climate change involved significant and difficult choices.

The third is: *Taking time for prayer, reflection, meditation, self- and other-compassion, for focusing on what really matters, and for envisioning and then moving into the lives we want to live; removing the barriers in everyday life that limit focus on important concerns.* I try to bring my own efforts at self-care and -compassion to my students. Several years ago, when I was feeling particularly low, I took a day off from teaching and when I came back told them that I had taken a mental health day. I thought it was important that they see how those ahead of them navigate the challenges life throws at us.

The fourth is: *service to communities to which we feel a sense of belonging and obligation and to which we devote some of our energy and time for common goals and purposes. These can be families, neighborhoods, cities, religious communities, political parties, nonprofit organizations, schools, universities, etc. This assumes a long-term obligation to others regardless of uncertainty.* In every class I try to break down the barriers between classroom and community. I have held and continue to hold entire classes off campus, including the History of Agriculture this semester in a greenhouse in Price Hill. The LAND degree I direct is designed to provide students with 7 semesters of work in the surrounding area so they might find out what they most want to do and with whom by the time they graduate.

**Master Jumpers: Let's take the students to the strut of the airplane, show them the exhilarating vision we see before us--which is often very different than what they see--and then jump!**

In conclusion, thanks to all of you who make for a softer landing. A special thanks to those colleagues who nominated me. And thanks to all of those who have pushed me to be and do things I would not have done otherwise, and this includes students, hundreds of them, who have trusted me with a small piece of their own resilience and values cultivation.

