

## BREAKING THROUGH UNCERTAINTY – WELCOMING ADVERSITY

by  
Jim McCormick

We all question our ability at times. Uncertainty plagues us. It is even more intense if the ability we are questioning relates to something we have never tried or not succeeded at in the past.

Setbacks are common, but we rarely welcome them. We are inclined to respond negatively to adversity. It may be time to revisit that reflexive response.

*“the greater dragon is  
not the external threat ...  
or another challenge.  
The real dragon is the  
self-doubt we carry  
within us.*

I had an experience recently that caused me to reconsider whether a negative response to adversity is always justified when I was confronted with a life-threatening situation.

It was mid-morning on a warm and pleasant Saturday. I was in the midst of my first skydive of the day. It was my 2,123th jump since having taken up the sport fifteen years ago.

After about one minute of freefall and 5,000 above the ground, I parted ways with my fellow jumpers to get far enough away from them to open my parachute safely. I initiated opening around 3,000 feet above the earth.

My parachute opened with some twists in the lines between the parachute and me. This is not that uncommon. What was different this time was that I was not able to clear the twists.

The twists in the lines caused my parachute to take on an asymmetrical shape. Receiving asymmetrical inputs, the canopy did what it is designed to do and initiated a turn -- that's how it's steered. The problem occurred when the turn quickly became a rapid, diving downward spiral that was spinning me a full 360 degrees about once every second. This was a problem.

I looked up to assess my canopy and saw something I don't often see – the horizon clearly visible ABOVE the trailing edge of my canopy. This meant my canopy and I were now on roughly the same horizontal plane. In that I could see the horizon behind it, I was actually above my parachute and it was leading our fast spinning parade rapidly towards mother earth.

My first need was to acknowledge that I was not going to be able to solve this problem. This is not as easy as it seems. Having successfully completed over 2,100 jumps without having to resort to my second parachute, it was hard for me to believe I had

really encountered a problem I could not solve. I had a natural inclination to assume I could fix this problem as I had all those in the past.

Sound familiar? It's always easy to lapse into denial when confronted with a problem. Until we acknowledge the problem and our possible inability to solve it – or to use the methods we have used in the past – we don't have a chance of making things better.

Fortunately, the urgency of this situation caused my hard-headed nature to yield much quicker than usual. That decision probably took a second or two.

The next step, having accepted the need to follow a different course than in the past, was to determine the course. Fortunately fifteen years of training and practice before every day of jumping took hold.

I looked straight down at the two handles on either side of my chest – one to release me from my malfunctioning canopy and one for deploying my reserve parachute – and realized I needed to quickly get them in my hands. I could not help but notice when I made eye contact with them, as had been ingrained in me during my First Jump Course way back in 1988, that by now the rapid spins had turned me back to earth and there beyond my toes was once again the horizon. This was bad!

Time was of the essence at this point not only because I was now rapidly progressing toward the horse pasture below me, but also because the centrifugal force I was starting to experience would soon make it impossible to get my hands to those two handles.

With my hands now securely on the handles, I was confronted with a bothersome question, "Now, which one goes first." The wrong order could cause my reserve parachute to deploy into my spinning main parachute which would result in an incurable entanglement.

Fortunately, ingrained training once again took over and I pulled them in the right order. First the handle on the right side which released me from my spinning main parachute followed by the handle on the left side to deploy my reserve parachute.

This brought on a wonderful experience. My malfunctioning black, teal and magenta canopy was replaced with a bright, yellow never before used reserve parachute. What a lovely sight! And all this by 1,700 feet – plenty of time to spare.

Many years ago, I read a book about the challenges and responsibilities of Secret Service agents. One of the sad aspects of that profession is that agents who never have the chance to validate their years of training by responding to a threat sometimes struggle severely in retirement. They are faced with not knowing – with certainty – how they would respond when faced with the paramount challenge their career can deliver. For this reason, agents who have faced such a challenge successfully are admired within the culture of the Service.

That Saturday morning, I had the privilege of facing a similar, life-threatening and I now realize life-defining challenge. I faced what Secret Service agents call “the dragon.”

For all of us the greater dragon is not the external threat, whether it be an assassin’s bullet, the unforgiving and fast approaching earth or another challenge. The real dragon is the self-doubt we carry within us.

For those few splendid moments after landing safely, I was able to put my foot firmly on the neck of the dragon ... and it felt great.

Keep this in mind the next time you are confronted with adversity. On the far side of the experiences the adversity presents, there could be a valuable gift – a renewed confidence and certainty.

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