Conquering the Fear of Heights

by

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There you can also find out more about the LearningMethods work and how extraordinarily effective it is at helping people learn for themselves how to be liberated from problems, how to better understand themselves and others, and navigate their lives more successfully.

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Conquering the Fear of Heights

As long as I can remember, I have had a powerful and crippling fear of heights. I have memories of moments where I was completely overwhelmed during some holidays; where climbing became a nightmare and I had the feeling I was not the master of my movements. Sometimes I felt strongly that someone was going to push me over the edge. Often, I felt drawn to the edge as if something was actually pulling me towards it and over it. I had to fight hard to resist this pull and I had the overwhelming symptoms of fear as if I was already on the edge ready to fall even when I was many metres away from the edge. This was a very scary feeling. I was shaking. I felt sick and I often ended up in tears.

I tried different things like forcing myself to go near heights even if I was afraid. Some friends tried to help me 'get over it' in this same way but none of them were successful. This, of course, only made me feel more stuck.
with the problem.

In July 1997 during a workshop on Learning Methods run by David Gorman (on which I was helping to teach), one of the students described her intense fear of heights. Just by listening to her explanation, I started to feel a little nauseous and I had to remind myself that I was only sitting on a sofa in a normal, quiet room. I shared with the group my own experiences with the same problem in order to support her and also because I was really ready to open this up for myself.

One of the premises of this work is that it is only possible to understand and make real changes by being in the middle of the real situation where the 'problem' appears so that one can experience directly what is actually happening. So we all went to a nearby cathedral on a hill where there was a open plaza with a 25 metre drop to the river. There was a low wall at the edge of the plaza before the drop. Definitely the sort of place to get my fears going.

David worked first with the other student. Starting from the centre of the plaza, quite far back from the edge, he asked her to start walking slowly toward the wall and stop as soon as she felt anything strange - any fear or the starting of a fear. I was applying this process to myself as he went through the process with her.

She began to walk toward the edge, one step after the other. Quite soon she said she felt a little sick. David asked her to stop walking right away. He asked her what exactly she was feeling (she said a tightening fear) and where precisely she was feeling it (in her chest and gut). He then asked her if this was what she normally felt in these situations. She thought for a moment and then said, yes it was, but normally she just ignored it and kept going because it was her 'fear of heights' feeling and she felt that she shouldn't be feeling this and didn't want to be feeling this.

David invited her to notice that even now she was in touch enough to register the first signs of her reaction, but that normally she wouldn't pay attention to or respond to these feelings. She would keep going in spite of the feelings until they suddenly rose up and overwhelmed her. But this time, she had a chance to respond differently to her own
feelings since she was now aware of them. He outlined an experiment she could make right at this moment. It was for her to choose consciously to let herself feel that sick feeling without trying to do anything to get rid of it or to pretend it is not there or to react and run away from the experience as she might usually do. In other words, to accept whatever she is feeling, simply because she is feeling it. At the same time, he said, it was important for her to consciously stay with her intention to walk closer to the wall, but, at the same time, because she was feeling this fear and sick feeling, she could also choose to not go any nearer to the edge while she was feeling it.

He emphasised to her that this was not a 'formula' she had to follow, but rather it really was a choice that she must consciously make - a choice that she was in complete control of. She really could choose to carry on walking closer to the wall in spite of her feeling, or to run away because of the feeling, but she could also choose to stay right where she was because she was feeling this symptom.

It took a while for her to accept the feeling and really let herself feel it without reaction or rush while at the same time staying with her intention to walk to the wall. She would either tend to lose her intention and just concentrate on the feeling, or regain the intention and want something to change so she could get going again. Then there came a moment when she finally accepted just being where she was at, feeling what she was feeling, even though she did want to get on toward the wall. Amazingly, a moment later the feeling was gone and she was just standing there feeling normal!

Then David told her to start walking toward the edge again, but to stop whenever she noticed any new reactions coming. Each time she felt the start of a symptom, she would stop and answer those questions of identification and location of the feeling and allowing herself to feel as she did while consciously keeping her intention to walk nearer to the wall. The process allowed her to stay in touch with herself at each moment.

After using this process two or three times, she began to really take in her surroundings; how far away she was from the wall and that she was actually standing on solid ground, not falling. So the process had served to bring her
into the present moment where she could rectly experience that there was no danger. Little by little, using this same means, she arrived close to the wall without being overwhelmed.

At this point we were all standing in front of the wall. David asked me how I felt, having witnessed all this. In fact, at this moment, I felt quite liberated from my usual pressured state near heights because I too had been able to choose to stop going forward as soon as I felt something strange in me, as soon as I felt any tightening or the starting of a fear.

In the process, I realised I was the master of my own movements! I realised also how much I was normally pushing myself to go closer even when I had symptoms coming to me telling me, "Danger! Stop!". Before, this message from my system had not been clear to me and so I had pushed it away as something I didn't like and had carried on trying to do what I wanted. Suddenly it was obvious why this approach could not work.

In fact, I was lying to myself, refusing to see the reality as it is, but as I wanted it to be. What an illusion! And what a disrespectful attitude to myself.

Each time in the past that I reacted to the symptom by pretending it was not there and pushing myself, the result was a much bigger, overwhelming reaction of fear and sickness where no action or choice could possibly be taken. I was pushing myself so hard that, in effect, I was in advance of where I really was. This was probably why, so often, I felt I was ahead of myself, pulled by the edge, unable to control myself. Now I saw that this feeling of being forced or pulled was in fact coming from me. This something that was going to pull me over the edge was me - Eileen pulling Eileen - a separation of identity so complete I didn't even know it was me anymore.

No wonder I could not know where I really was in space relative to the edge and no wonder I had such strong symptoms. All of this came clear to me at this moment and I felt free of pushing myself and could allow myself to be me. What a good feeling it is! What a realisation!

With this new feeling of freedom I suddenly decided to sit on the low wall right at the edge. The group was very surprised because all
their attention had been with the student and they didn't know that I had been using from the beginning what David was suggesting to the student and that I had had all those revelations. Earlier in the class inside they had heard me expressing my fear of heights and the next moment they saw me sitting on the edge of a wall!

But I wanted even more. I asked David, "What about sitting on the other side of the wall with my feet on the air?" Everyone was shocked. Even the ones with no fear of heights wouldn't have dreamed of sitting so close to such a high drop. What a jump for me (pardon the pun)! What had happened was that the sudden liberation made me feel like everything was possible. After so long being so held back by this fear, now that I was liberated, I wanted more - which, of course, was not realistic unless I was to become an acrobat!

The second chance to experiment with my new-found tools was on a high-diving board the next day. Approaching the diving board, which was about 3 metres above the water, I felt something in my stomach so David recommended that I stop walking as soon as I felt this kind of sickness and go through the same process as yesterday. It took quite a number of times and at least half an hour for me to arrive on the top of the diving board looking down at the water. The feeling of being sick in the stomach was coming back again and again. But the process was always the same - to stay aware of what is going on for me step by step; to not go ahead while I am feeling any fear (in other words, to be in touch with myself); to choose to respond to my feelings with respect and without reacting to them.

Eventually I was able to jump off the board without the fear overwhelming me and again I felt quite triumphant and liberated.

After those experiences, I had other opportunities to use the same tools, namely to stay in the present moment, see where I am and see how I feel, to come back to the reality of the situation and to check if what I imagine (like someone is going to push me over the edge) is actually happening or not. But I can tell you, it was still a big challenge to stay with this process in the face of such big feelings. Especially in 'real life' instead of a 'lesson'. But
each time it worked.

I had a few opportunities during our summer vacation in Maine while walking on the high rocks by the sea. This was now two months after the first realisations. David helped me to go through those same tools again. His help allowed me to go little by little; not going past the place where any kind of reflection or thinking becomes impossible.

This spring (nine months later) we went to the Gorges de L'Ardèche in the south of France with its huge cliffs and deep river chasms. I felt perfectly normal and didn't even notice that I had no more fear of heights until David pointed it out to me.

Now that this particular fear seems to be past I have tools to help me use this same process if I feel the beginning of some other fear. I don't consider the fear as a failure as I used to, but as my true feeling and a message for me to listen to. I can use that message to remind me to use my tools to give myself a chance to see what it really is that is happening. As I come into the moment I can see that my fear is not what is happening and, of course, it goes away.

The problem of having the fear of heights was so big and so present before in my life that I thought that the very best possibility would just be to be able to learn some way of coping. Or to avoid going into nature which you can imagine was not a satisfying solution at all. I thought it had become part of me - who I am, my identity.

To my surprise, I am free from that now in only a few months by using this process through just five or six practical experiences. As a bonus, other areas in my life are also opening up that I didn't even realise were connected.

For instance, this spring, I found I could bring under control another fear which had similar ingredients to this fear of heights. That is my fear in cars, which I have also had for years. In all the situations I am about to describe, I am not the driver of the car, but I am sitting in the front seat beside the driver when the driver is coming up behind another car to overtake. Quite often, I thought that we were going to crash into the car in front of us. It really felt like it - the fear, the reaction was certainly there. I would become very tensed as
if I had to hold myself backwards from the car in front of us. Each time I was the only one in the car to react and to think that an accident was about to happen. In a long distance trip you can imagine the amount of stress that would build up in me, and believe me, it is not fun for anyone!

One time when I was driving with David and this happened, he asked me what I was afraid of and I explained him that each time I thought we were going to crash in the car in front of us. He realised that this issue has to do with my evaluation of time and distance.

David suggested an experiment: that as soon as I feel afraid, to start counting the seconds before we arrived close to the car so that I could really see the amount of time it took to get close. So I started this experiment on the highway whenever I started to be afraid. This was the same process as in my fear of heights - to be in touch with myself as soon as I have a message of fear, to not react, but to allow the feeling and keep aware of what was happening.

Each time I had the opportunity to do this experiment, I did it! Almost each time, I could count at least 1... 2... 3... 4... 5... seconds before we were getting close to the car. I realised that in this amount of time, each driver had lots of choice if necessary, to stop, to slow down, etc. So, gradually, my value system, my judgement system for driving, readjusted for time and distance just as it had for time and distance with heights. I saw that where I thought there was danger, in fact, there was no real danger. Instead there was enough time to respond if needed.

Once again, I realised I was ahead of myself, already crashing into the back of the car in front of us. That's why I had to tense myself backward - to protect myself. My judgement system for time and distance is now more accurate, more realistic. Already I am less afraid, though I continue to use this mean of counting if I need to.

Just like in the fear of heights, how much ahead of myself I was! With the heights, part of the fear was that I felt pulled out onto the empty air, and with the car I was already far ahead, many metres in front of where I really was in space. Working with the first issue brought much more clarity to the second one.
I'm sure that I will see connections with other areas in my life where I am also misjudging time and distance and then reacting as if it was all real.

**Change is possible... and exciting!**

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**Addendum - a year later (October 1998)**

One day, I was staying at the house of some friends in an apartment on the third floor. The friends were near the end of adding a new extension to their apartment up on their roof and so there was scaffolding up one side of the house to the roof. One afternoon as we came back to the house, nobody was there to open the door and we didn't have the keys. It was cold and raining and since we knew that one of the windows in the new roof extension would be unlocked, we decided to climb all the way up through the scaffolding rather than stay and wait for them in the rain.

First I looked around to take in the conditions, since it was raining and slippery. I was aware right away of the need of going slowly and taking this climb as another experiment of playing around with my heights issue. I consciously chose to deal with one thing at the time, rather than just seeing the end as arriving at the window of the new fourth floor, which would have been my habitual reaction.

I started to climb the ladder up from the
ground to the first section of scaffolding. It was really the first time that I had ever climbed such a long ladder. I went slowly, knowing that I could at any moment go down or stop and wait for a while. I chose to go at my own rhythm, one step at a time. I felt at peace with this knowledge and with the freedom to do what I choose to. After climbing this shaky ladder, I arrived at the level of the first scaffolding - the start of the first floor above ground level. There my heart started to beat quite fast as I looked down at the view. I could recognize one of those panic moments when I'd start to be overwhelmed. I was getting tenser, feeling almost ready to cry. I was holding onto one of the metal scaffolding poles. I felt kind of stuck there, getting rigid as this pole, feeling like a victim. But in recognizing this, I chose to look again at the situation - not to be passive, but to act - to be aware of what was happening for me. I found myself able to use my reasoning and I realised that I could not fall unless I actually voluntarily decided to jump.

As soon as my attitude changed, I decided to sit down so I was less overwhelmed by the view from this height. This was such a release for me to stay in touch with myself and choose what is the best for me considering the situation. My legs were shaking from the previous 'state of panic' moment. But I was much more confident in my capacity of being present in the situation in a conscious and active way. I continued to climb all the way up using the same means of going one step at the time and being able to respond to whatever is happening in the present moment. My legs stayed quite shaky from the previous experience, but I accepted this as a fact and that this physical reaction will take a while to come back to normal. I chose not to fight against this lightness feeling, but to go with it.

No other panic moments happened on the way up. At the end, I felt such a victory. That one short moment of almost panic I went through showed me again that if, at the first sign of fear, I can take a moment to really see what's going on, I change from a passive to an active attitude. I am bigger. I am the boss. The fear is not going to 'paralyse' me. I am moveable and I can make the choices that suit me. I can meet the fear and still be able to
continue the process. Even if the fear has shaken me up, I come back to what I have learned from the past and address the situation and prevail.

It is such a freedom for me to continue in this path of experimenting. Even a few months before, I would never have imagined being able to climb this high on this kind of ladder and scaffolding.

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Following up and learning for yourself...

If you are interested in working on similar issues in your life, contact Eileen (or one of the other LearningMethods Teachers close to your area) to discuss how you can get help to change. You can arrange in-person private or small-group sessions; you can attend a course or workshop; or if you do not live near a teacher, you can also work very effectively in telephone sessions.

To read more about the LearningMethods work, find out about upcoming courses, how to study, or about training as a teacher, etc., visit the LearningMethods website and follow the appropriate links.

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About the Author:

Eileen Sellam comes to teaching the LearningMethods work from a background in dance, music and the Alexander Technique. She completed her training as teacher of Alexander Technique in France and the United States.

Over the years, her work has been enriched by her encounters with many teachers and by her experiences in Indian dance, singing, painting and the martial arts.

Up to 1996 Eileen worked with singers of the École de Formation Lyrique de l'Opéra Bastille in Paris. She then became a teacher of the LearningMethods work and was giving private classes in LearningMethods in the south of France and Paris as well as teaching regularly at the Conservatoire de Théâtre in Avignon before a recent move to Canada.

In between the demanding job of raising a young son and being a professional translator, Eileen also gives teaches LearningMethods and gives workshops in Improvisational Creativity in numerous countries in Europe and Canada.

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Video of a Patterns workshop in Stockholm on the suspension system model, breathing, voice, exercise, and more 4 DVDs, 12+ hours (PAL & NTSC)

Even a recording of the Sounds of a Provence Summer -- Day & Night an audio CD of the quintessential sounds of the hot Provençal summer -- the cigales (cicadas) by day and the crickets at night. 1 CD (76 minutes)
More about the LearningMethods work:

We are the most amazing learning creatures on the planet. We have a wonderful in-built intelligence, an exquisitely sensitive awareness and a wealth of experience. Yet we still suffer from so many chronic and completely unnecessary problems. Why?

Because only a few people have moved into their full heritage as humans and learned how to bring their intelligence to bear on their experience to understand and solve their problems.

How do I know this?

I see it every day in my teaching. Once people learn the simple yet incredibly powerful tools of how to unravel what’s happening to them they can change far more easily and quickly than they dreamed possible. How can this happen?

Because everything we need is already within us -- most of us simply do not yet know how to use it. LearningMethods teaches you the set of tools to navigate your life successfully -- to find your way back to your natural wholeness; to be free of tension and effort; to be more effective and stress-free at work and to be more at ease and open socially with others. In fact, the tools for solving any problem that’s solvable.

It is not a far-off dream -- it is in your nature to be able to learn from experience and liberate yourself from problems. It is your birthright to gain wisdom about life and feel at home in the universe. And there is no time like the present to start!

David Gorman, founder of LearningMethods

Find out more about LearningMethods, upcoming workshops, finding teachers, read on-line articles:

LearningMethods Home page

What is LearningMethods?
- How it can help you, what you'll learn
- The premises and principles of the work

How do I study it?
- How LM is taught and various ways to study it

Upcoming Workshops
- Calendar of workshops and upcoming events

Finding a Teacher
- List of LM teachers and apprentice-teachers

Quotes and Testimonials - How LM has helped

On-line Library of Articles
- Articles on the work and solving various problems

Training as an LM Teacher
- What is involved in becoming an LM Teacher
The spread of the LearningMethods work
There are a growing number of certified Teachers of LearningMethods who have graduated from a rigorous multi-year apprenticeship training program. All teachers subscribe to a Code of Conduct and are re-licenced every two years.

Here are some examples of where the LearningMethods work is being or has been taught by various teachers:

In the Performance Community
Many of the teachers and apprentice-teachers are professional performers or music/drama/movement teachers and the work has become increasingly popular in performance schools and conservatories as well as among professional artists and performers as a powerful way to solve performance-related problems and enhance practice and performance skills.

The LearningMethods work is being integrated into the 3-year degree course in Contemporary Circus at the University College of Dance (Danshögskolan) in Stockholm. This professional circus arts training is allied with the famous Cirkus Cirkör.

Taught in the Voice Area of the Music Department of the University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee) for college-level singing teachers and choral conducting teachers and professional singers and conductors

A LearningMethods teacher is employed on staff at the Royal College of Music (Kungliga Musikhögskolan) in Stockholm where the LearningMethods work is taught as a for-credit course as well as being available to students for problem-solving help.

Taught in the Music Department of the Australian National University (Canberra) to the faculty and graduate students

Teaching LearningMethods / Patterns of Being at the University of Minnesota / Guthrie Theater BFA Actor Training Program in Minnesota, USA

Prince Edward Island CONSERVATORY

For directors and actors at the Prince Edward Island Conservatory associated with the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada
With actors from the Stratford Shakespearean Festival in Stratford, Ontario

Worked with actors at the Shaw Festival Theatre in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada

Regular ongoing classes at the Conservatoire de Théâtre in Avignon, France

Worked with singers at the Lyrique Opéra de Bastille in Paris, France

Taught to string players in the Music Department at St. Olaf College, in Minnesota, USA

...and many more conservatories and colleges in Europe, Canada and the USA.

Also in the planning stages is a LearningMethods Training for Music Educators designed so that teachers of music, singing, conducting, etc. can gain the skills to use this work with their students.

Interest in the work from Business

There is a growing interest from business in the effective and quick results of this work as they look for how to solve the ever-increasing problems of stress, tension and anxiety, how to improve communication, and how to help employees use themselves better and avoid injury.

LearningMethods as a problem-solving and communications tool was part of a 1-year post-graduate International Business Negotiation course at the University of Avignon, France

LearningMethods Teachers worked with employees of a liquor distributing company on how to improve the ways they use themselves in movement and in handling heavy weights in their job.

Working with prisoners in both Swedish and USA prisons on the issues that come up for them in their daily life and the longer-term issues of how to change for the better.

The work will change all areas of daily life

LearningMethods teaches you the tools of investigating and changing almost any problem in your life, for instance, panic attacks and social anxiety, conflict in relationships or with children, quitting smoking or losing weight, chronic tension and pain, procrastination, phobias, you name it...

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