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Flying Through My Fears

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It occurs to me that I am more like my mother than I had thought. As a role model, my mother was always more liberated than housewife. When she was fifty, she started pilot training. I didn't want to be left out, so I took lessons too. We used to fly as pilot and co-pilot in the Powder Puff Derby, a cross-country women's air race. Little did I know I was in training to meet up with the infamous Red Baron. The years I spent flying with my mother were Sparky's inspiration for a 1975 Sunday comic. Peppermint Patty and Marcie were flying atop Snoopy's doghouse, from California to Michigan. They were following the race my mother and I were flying that year.

Like my mother, I have made some daring moves in my life. I had only known Sparky a year when we married and meshed our two families. It might have seemed risky, but I entered the relationship with complete trust. I've never considered myself brave; I've just learned to overcome my fear. I was afraid of heights, but I learned to fly a plane. I hated gushy things in the ocean, so I learned to scuba dive. When I concentrate on something, the fear dissipates. I've had to overcome fear many times in my life.

It took me a long time to let myself "fly" from the trapeze. By nature, I am practical and have had to keep focused on the tasks that need to get done. But in order to fly on the trapeze, I had to hang by my knees, swinging backwards. I had to get up speed, only to let go. It takes a certain amount of faith to hang upside down, thirty feet over the ground, albeit with a net and harness. It took an immeasurable amount of faith to release my anchored knees from the bar, trusting that I would fly into the hands of the catcher. I don't think it's any coincidence that the flying trapeze is also the place where I have sought refuge in my life beyond Sparky.

On the twenty-mile drive over to Sam Keen's ranch, where there's a trapeze nestled in the oak trees, I generally am thinking of all that I have to do: how Snoopy can appear, licensing agreements, building and maintaining the Schulz museum, answering all the heartfelt letters. But driving home, I feel exhilarated

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and satisfied. I've had a place to practice being bold. To revel in the small victories and put aside, while in the air, everything that is happening on the ground. I still realize I have a lot to do, but there is a more relaxed focus to it.

When Sparky died, I immediately became busy working with family members and advisors, to sort out the business of the arena and the studio, and the museum project. Because Sparky was much too modest to honor himself, I had taken the lead on the Schulz Museum and Research Center. When he died, the museum was in its beginning stages; I had to finish it. I realize that having multiple layers of "busy-ness" in the period following Sparky's death, kept me from having extraneous feelings or letting my emotions run too much. The mad pace of keeping up with what I had, kept me from thinking too much about what I had lost.

I tend to be private in my deeper feelings. Sparky was much more likely to say loving things than I was. We had this little game where he would say, "You told me once, but I forgot." He would be prompting my response to the question, ""Do you love me or do you not?" I had given the poem to him once in a frame. I used to call Sparky "my sweet Babboo." One day in the strip, Sally started calling Linus "my sweet Babboo." I was flattered.

I came out of "retirement" to continue Sparky's legacy. It's rich for me. I realize the pressure of his life better now than when he was alive. I knew that he had a horrendous drawing schedule. He drew and lettered the strip by himself, for fifty years, creating more than 18,000 strips. He felt the emotions in the strip while he was drawing it. Though I had an understanding of that part of his life, I didn't realize the pressure of being Charles M. Schulz, the creator of Peanuts and how diplomatic he always had to be. Fortunately, I'm more extroverted than Sparky was. It must have been really stressful for him.

Sparky gave me the gift of being completely supportive of me. He was always building me up, telling me that I could be anything I wanted to be. He was seventeen years older than I, and very much a teacher to me. He taught me enough to absorb the bits of wisdom he was giving me. Though Sparky is not here, in my work and personal life, he's still present. I haven't emptied Sparky's drawers or closets yet. Maybe it's because, in a way, I'm stepping into Sparky's shoes everyday. Maybe it's just because I have enough room to store all his stuff. I don't have to let him go.

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I still have a lot of fun with him. I hear his voice and it takes me back. Sometimes I ask him to help me find things. I say, Sparky, where is it? And pretty soon, it appears. Every now and then, Sparky used to be cranky. Now I laugh at myself when I am cranky. I'm cranky and laughing for my sake and for his. I am carrying Lucy's legacy.

My way of mourning Sparky is by celebrating him. I continue to tell his story because it's a story of value. He was a man following his dream. I take his memory very seriously. He wanted to be known for the thing he put so much effort into. I don't want that "thing" to be distorted or taken out of context. I am more fortunate than other widows because I don't have to sing Sparky's praises; people all around me are doing it everyday. Everyone has a heartfelt story to tell about the Peanuts' gang.

The flying trapeze can be a metaphor for my life. In some ways, it's a team effort; in some ways, it's an individual sport. It's not a baseball game where I would feel bad if I struck out; or a tennis match where, if I missed an overhead, I'd feel like I'd blown something. In many ways, the performance on the trapeze is my own. It's not something, like golf, that I shared with Sparky. It is mine, alone.

Sparky encouraged me to go for it. When he was in the hospital, he'd say, "go to your trapeze. I'm okay. It's important for you." He was preparing me for the days that he wouldn't be here. He was proud of me for the challenges he saw me take on. Through the years, I have learned to trust myself in the sky and on the ground.

Comments or inquiries about this story?

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