

# EARLHAM COLLEGE

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## The Art of Falling Into the Future

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Thank you, Vivi, for that wonderful introduction, and Kimmie for that beautiful reading. Graduates, today is your day. But in the words of the great Bruce Springsteen: “you didn’t get here all by yourself—you had to have help...” So, please give a round of applause for all those in the audience who helped you to arrive at this day. To the parents, especially, I want to say thank you for entrusting your offspring to us. They have brought great joy and happiness into my life. As with all graduations, today’s is touched by a bit of melancholy. Watching yet another class leave Earlham reminds me of the passage of time. But, I promise will attempt to make you laugh, I will attempt to inspire, and I will try to make you think the thoughts that you will need as you move to the next phase of your life. And, I will try not to cry.

The title of my talk today, “The Art of Falling into the Future,” came to me from a very early life memory. As a young child I developed a fascination with horses. I spent hours looking at pictures of horses, and while I did not have art talent, I could draw horses. I watched Mr. Ed on TV, repeatedly, and learned to read on the *Misty of Chincoteague* book series.

Now, what comes next, I promise you this is all true—I assure you I could not make this up.

On warm, summer days I would venture into the woods behind my house, gather the branches that had fallen during winter and spring storms, to create a set of jumps for “my horses.” Usually this began as solitary activity. When the course was well constructed I would head out of the woods to gather “my horses.” Once at my jumping arena, I would command “my horses” to jump the jumps while I ran behind them whipping them with a sapling. “My horses”: my friends who for some unknown reason seemed to love this game as much as I did.

Every Christmas my parents would drag me to see Santa, and, of course, I would ask Santa for a horse. Figuring that giving Santa fewer options would ensure delivery of a horse, I only asked for a horse. On Christmas Eve I would lie awake hoping to hear Santa arrive with the horse until, finally, I fell into sleep. And, on Christmas Day, I would wake up, sneak into the living room thoroughly expecting to see a horse tied to the Christmas tree. I know it is crazy—right? How would a horse be in the living room? Sometimes, I would get a stuffed horse; sometimes, a rocking horse; sometimes, a book on horses—but never a horse. To this day I still associate Christmas mornings with profound disappointment. Santa, I learned, could not be counted on. One might ponder what might have

become of me had Santa managed to deliver a horse to that living room. Would I be teaching positive psychology, and would it then fall to Vince Punzo to hold up the part of our curriculum dedicated to the relentless criticism of everything?

In my parents' defense, which is not to say they need defending, they simply could not afford a horse. Neither of my parents had attended college, and my father dropped out of high school at age of 16 to work in the shipyards. He was a milkman, a job that no longer exists in our economy. My Dad delivered bottles of milk to homes every day between 5 a.m. and 3 p.m. When he returned home around 4, my mother would leave for her job. We did not have money for a horse, but that was no excuse for Santa. But, we will leave the problems with Santa for another discussion.

Now, my father had a charming personality and made friends that crossed the lines of class and race before anyone was advocating diversity. Soon, he met someone who owned a stable, and they worked out a deal for me. I would muck stalls at the stable, and in exchange I would nurse back to health a horse that was slated for the glue factory: the horse would be "mine." Surely, my friends were disappointed that our little games in the woods had come to an end, but I suspect they have gone on to create their own versions of the game. Some of you may have as well. But, I had my first job at the young age of 8, and believe me the work was not easy.

In my first riding lesson, my riding coach told me I needed to learn to fall. I am sure that any of you who have engaged in a sport have been given this advice: if you learn to fall you won't hurt yourself: bizarre piece of advice. How does one learn to fall? I tried practicing. I would suddenly let my body go limp and begin to slump to the ground, but I would always catch myself, prevent the fall. This was of course in the days before anyone could think of a trust fall: something I have never done. I could not learn to fall without help. I needed the cooperation of the physical world.

After a while, I did not need to simulate a fall. Riding was full of opportunities to fall. I was riding English, and when I started jumping, my horse, the real one, would sometimes do that thing horses do. He would canter up to the jump, my body crouched forward over his neck, he and I in perfect harmony with the forward momentum until he would stop dead in front of the jump. And sometimes, but not always—and this is important—I would find myself sitting on the ground, having, shall we say, taken the jump without the horse. And, as horses will do at such moments, he would give me that blank look: "duh how did you get down there"? But, I did not always land on the ground. Sometimes I would feel that he was going to swerve or stop, and even though the momentum was carrying me forward, a slight adjustment could give me just enough time to correct his course and we would take the jump together.

I was indeed learning the art of falling: knowing when to fight the fall and when not to. And, most of the time there was some decision involved on my part: a moment when I said to myself, "Kid, you need to let this one go." But, it was only a decision in the sense that it could not have been made otherwise.<sup>1</sup> It was the kind of a decision that has none of the qualities that we commonly associate with a decision. To say I decided to fall suggests a control I clearly lacked in the matter.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis *Surprised by Joy* London: Fontana: 1997 (174-175) quoted in Slavoj Zizek *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. MIT Press, 2003: pg 21-22.

Falling seemed to require putting myself in alignment with the inevitable. In this sense, learning to fall required what Bourdieu terms “a feel for the game”: a recognition, although not a conscious recognition, but an embodied recognition that the time for fighting had come to an end.<sup>2</sup>

Now some of you may be thinking, “Oh, I know, she is going to talk to us about taking times for ourselves, about relaxing, about mastering the art of controlling how difficulty and ease bring each other about.” That is not what I am saying. Taking time for yourself, however worthy, however important, is the opposite of the art of falling. The art of falling cannot be found in the art of managing time. Indeed, managing time is antithetical to the art of falling. In fact the wonderful seductiveness of the art of falling is that it eludes mastery. Falling, when it happens, happens in an instant, an instant in which all perspective changes: I am sitting on the ground looking up at a horse that seconds ago I was guiding over a jump. Falling breaks with all management, all journeys, all paths.

The anthropologist in me imagines, even longs for, a time in which the art of falling was commonly known and practiced. Was there ever a society before technological rationality had taken hold when people just developed the art of falling alongside all the other great arts of life such as the art of conversation, an appreciation of slowness, and the release of deep belly laugh? Like Levi-Strauss who thought he had found in the Brazilian Amazon a people not constrained by naming, I sometimes think Don Abram, whom I spent hours with in my more than 15 years of research in Mexico, knew the art of falling if only I had been wise enough in my youth to ask him about such things.<sup>3</sup> But, I am far too aware, because I am an anthropologist, of the dangers of such facile, nostalgic imaginings to allow my mind to fall into that space. Well, perhaps it already has but let me pry it free. I know that if there is an art of falling into the future, it is probably here, right under my nose in the places I rarely notice.

I suspect that in about a week or two something akin to vertigo will begin to take hold of you. Milan Kundera speaks of vertigo as a sensation that will overtake anyone who aspires to “something higher,” and as Earlham graduates, you have been enjoined to do nothing less than go out and change the world. You have role models: Earlham grads who have gone before you and left their mark on the world. Manning Marable, Class of 1971, professor of African-American Studies at Columbia who died a little over a year ago; Francis Moore Lappé, Class of 1966, author of *Diet for A Small Planet*, activist and founder of many organizations for social justice; Barbara “Bobbie” Gottschalk, Class of 1964 and cofounder of Seeds of Peace; and of course Joanna (Gypsy) Swanger, Class of 1989 and director of our own Peace Studies program. As you contemplate your future you will experience the essential ingredient of vertigo—the sense that you must reach high and beyond yourself. Vertigo will be the mark Earlham has left on your being. But, vertigo takes place when that desire for something higher meets the desire to fall, the desire to submit to the space of emptiness that beckons us from below and against which we attempt to marshal all of our forces.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre *The Logic of Practice* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990: pg. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss *Tristes Tropiques* New York: Penguin Books 1992; Jacques Derrida “The Violence of the Letter” In *Of Grammatology* Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1997:101-118.

<sup>4</sup> Milan Kundera *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Harper Perennial Classic Edition, 1999:60

For many of you psychic vertigo may be complicated by the uneasy feeling that you feel compelled to reach, but for what? If you majored in So/An or Philosophy or PAGS, you may be thinking, “Why didn’t I become a Math major so I could be an actuary—one of the professions NPR reports has a shortage of workers—or why didn’t I go to engineering school or into a biotech program, and what can I do with the liberal arts? If only my degree could label me, set me on a path so that I know where I will be a year, two years from now.” It was indeed, for faculty, a busy season for last minute letters of recommendation: many attempts to avoid the art of falling into the future.

This desire to leave college with a clearly marked career path, is akin to the seductive appeal of genetically modified seeds: perfectly adapted to the conditions for which they are produced but pushing out the biodiversity needed for a sustainability. Ask yourself: do you really want to be that seed that can only grow and be hardy under certain clearly defined conditions? Conditions change rapidly. The mere announcement of a job shortage results in an explosion of majors in that field. And, like genetically modified seeds, too tight of a relationship between a college education and specific career path renders you incapable of responding to a changing world. Earlham has tried to educate you not just for next two years, but for your life. We hope you are leaving us as agile, quick footed, and adaptable survivors who have a feel for the art of falling.

Perhaps at no time is the art of falling more important than now, in this space between achieving a goal—in this case graduation—and moving on with the rest of your life. To cite the first philosopher of life you probably encountered, the incomparable, the amazing Dr. Seuss, you may feel you have arrived at “The Waiting Place”: “Waiting for a train to go or a bus to come.”<sup>5</sup> It’s a scary, dangerous place where you might succumb not to the art of falling—not to a feel for how difficulty and ease bring each other about—but to lethargy, manifested in endless hours on Facebook or playing videogames.

You are not the first, nor will you be the last, to be in this waiting space. With the advantage of hindsight let me share with you some things your faculty have done when they were in this space. Did you ever notice Jay Roberts’ warm smile and laid back, easy going manner?—Starbucks Barista. When Kari Kalve first arrived on campus I noted how easy it was to talk to her. She learned the power of conversing about the weather selling gourmet hot dogs to beings in suits from the world of corporate capital. You may have read a book that everyone I knew in my youth read: *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. As a self-designed major in Comparative Religions and Eastern Philosophy, Forrest Tobey, I say to you it is time: Sustainable Zen and the Art of Bicycle Maintenance. Bob Rosenberg has emerged as a super human in my eyes now that I know he spent a winter working on a lobster boat in Maine. Julie May: arm wrestler. Now, any one of these jobs might have turned into the center of these people’s existence, but they did not. I will return to this point in my conclusion.

Let me tell you about two Earlham graduates who mastered the art of falling in that space after graduation and before the rest of their lives. Amy Rosenberg, Class of 1995, now an anthropology professor at the University of Texas at Austin, stumbled upon her first job when she dialed a wrong

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Places You’ll Go*. Random House, 1990.

number. Folks who think that life is a straight line, who think one marches into the future, or who have too much to do, who are not in “the waiting place”: when they dial a wrong number they apologize and hang up. But, Amy, a So/An major, curious about life in the waiting place, took the time for conversation with the receptionist. The result: she was hired as the director of social service agency in Philadelphia.

The recent 2007 graduate Patrick Frankart fell into his current employment while on his way to something else. After graduating with a degree in philosophy he went on to earn a Master’s in Philosophy from the University of Sussex in the UK. When he returned home in the midst of the current economic crisis he decided he didn’t really want to do a Ph. D. in philosophy and so he turned to pursuing that profession that seems so secure: law. And, like most folks who want to go to law school, Patrick decided to take an LSAT course with a well-known company, but he found the repetition of practice tests without much analysis of the logic of the test itself wanting. So, he taught himself the logic of the test, took the LSAT and scored very high. Then he did something unexpected. He thought of all the people sitting in that room taking that course and how much money this company must be making. And so he advertised his services on Craigslist as a LSAT tutor. I talked to Patrick about a year ago. Law school is still on the back burner and he is hiring and training his own employees to tutor for the LSAT. Stay focused, know your dreams, don’t get distracted: perhaps not good advice for this moment.

Now, I have not been on a horse in years, and I had long forgotten learning to fall. I still take a glance at horses in the fields on my way to work, but life and its passions have taken me elsewhere. But, Ferit Güven and I were teaching an IP together, and we were reading Kundera. The discussion turned to the theme of falling, and of course we were trying to get a bunch of first-year students to appreciate the notion of the abyss, of its seductive emptiness and its relationship to lightness. Poor first years. And, at that moment, I recalled the intimate relationship with falling that I had developed while learning to ride. And, of course, that moment was the first time I told the story of learning to fall, so in a sense my talk today was conceived, first in my riding lesson, then in a first- year class seven years ago.

The careful listeners, the theory junkies and Zen Buddhists among us today will suspect that I have violated the spirit of the abyss by naming it; they will say I have slipped too easily from the moment of the fall to the landing, thus avoiding the abyss. I think I have to acknowledge that, yes, I am guilty of trying to capture the fall in the traces that it has left on our being. By discussing a job stumbled into or a landing that changes your perspective, I have meant to invite you to consider the so many falls in your life that you have never named, or perhaps named at the instant they took place only to forget them later. And yet, these falls may linger in your existence as the odd term that cannot be narrated as path or journey to a given end.

Certainly, sometimes we fall into our destiny or imagine we do, and everything seems to fit; we sense that we were called to do what we are now doing. Earlham is like that for me, but that is another story for another day. Today, I want to suggest that maybe even more important than destiny are the moments when we fall into a perspective or point of view that leaves its traces in ways

we may not recognize: a certain way of smiling, or a sense of comfort that emerges when we are around a certain kind of person, or a verbal crack of the whip that resurfaces from a childhood game in the woods. What if we think of our existence, not as a path or journey, but as a circulation of all these moments, that rests uncomfortably in our being? What if—wait for it—the center of our being is not the center?<sup>6</sup>

In closing, I should say that I sat down to write this graduation speech thinking it should be funny, light, and easy to understand, but in the end I fell into these words. I don't know if I succeeded in making my thoughts intelligible, but in case I have not, let me remind you; this speech is a gift that I give you as graduates, and as with all gifts, it circulates in an economy of gift giving that binds us together: you and me, you and Earlham, you and your classmates. My talk today cannot be disentangled from all the conversations we have had together over the last four years: in classes, in offices, and via the Internet in its various forms. I hope that my words will come back to you, especially in those moments when you are in the "waiting place." If they do not, or if you have some vague memory of what I said, please e-mail me, or Facebook me, because as you know the circulation of gifts holds relationships together.

Thank you and congratulations: Today is your day...you are off and away.

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<sup>6</sup> See Derrida, Jacques, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"  
In *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, 1978: 278-293.