

James Robinson
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Good morning! How many people here heard a story last night?

At Timanous we love stories. At night around the lantern, counselors share stories of their day-off adventures, of their tower climbs, or of their service in the Vietnam war, an impressive feat for someone who is 35. Around the table, we share the stories of how our days are going—if we got any qualifiers for our bar 1, or got on base in the twilight league game. And during announcements we share stories from our dreams, what we heard from the nature shaman, nursing shaman, tennis shaman and the bread shaman.

At Timanous, stories make us laugh and allow us to share memories. But stories are also how we document our growth and look to better ourselves.

As one of camp's photographers, I have the pleasure of meandering the wooded path every day and watching these stories unfold. In photography, there is something called a "decisive moment." It's the split second just before an action unfolds. As photographers, we look to capture these moments—the face you make before diving for the first time, the outstretched glove reaching for that pop-up, the quiet determination before releasing an arrow from the bow in archery.

In these photographs, you can't tell how the story will end—whether he will catch the ball, or shoot a bullseye. Rather, the focal point of these images is the story that is going through the subject's mind. It's the joyful smirk of Pat just before he shares the punchline of his story. It's the clenched fists of Shane as he braces his fists before jumping in the water on a cold morning. It's the determination of Henry as he throws a dart.

When we walk away from a morning dip, or one of Pat's awesome stories, or Timanadarts, we might tell others that the water is cold, or that we got a bullseye, or that we laughed so hard we snorted. But today I want to talk about the split-second moment before we knew this outcome. What is the story that we tell ourselves during life's decisive moments?

I want to begin talking about these decisive moments—those seconds right before an outcome is known—by sharing a story of my own. I cannot remember the first time this story was told to me—perhaps it was after I had been caught pretend reading during silent reading in first grade. Mrs. Surface could tell I was faking it because I was holding the book upside down. Or maybe it was after my dreams of being a professional baseball player were crushed when I got the first ever strike-out in a game of t-ball.

But throughout my childhood, my mother would always tell my brother and I that she could fly. Of course, anyone can fly. Commercial flying is a feat of human ingenuity. Millions of passengers fly every year. And at any one time there are an average of half a million people in the sky. But my mom wasn't talking about metal tubes. In fact she hates airplanes. She has an irrational, primordial fear of them.

So perhaps she meant it in a metaphorical sense. Well, parents all over the world tell their kids that they can do great things, that they will achieve success and they might even say that their kids will “take flight.”

But when my mom spoke of flying, it was not in the future tense. When she spoke of flying, it was not a hypothetical. She told us that she could literally fly. That she spread her arms, and leaned into the wind and that her feet lifted off of the ground. She told us that she had flown multiple times and that she had once touched the upper branches of a tall pine tree.

She told us that if we wanted to fly, we had to wait for the right conditions—we had to wait for what she described as “flying weather.” And we would know that it was “flying weather” because it would be windy, and it would smell like the tropics.

And when my brother and I told her that she was crazy and that we didn’t believe her, she would only smile and say, “Well, one day maybe you will fly too.”

I doubt that I have many believers right now. But I’m going to ask you to believe—if only for a few minutes—in the seemingly impossible. What if you found yourself on the field, and you smelled the sweet tropical air, and you spread your arms? What would it be like to fly for the first time?

For starters, you would have to feel completely unfazed by an idea that many see as crazy. If you want to fly, you have to **believe flying is possible**. And you have to be willing to go outside when it’s windy. You can’t be afraid of looking dumb when you stand in the heavy winds and you spread your arms. You can’t be put off by people who tell you that flying is only possible in a metal tube. You have to be willing to run for the door with the excitement of a child, the minute you sense hints of “flying weather.”

As you take your first step outside, you might realize that the wind is much stronger than you thought possible. You will feel self-conscious and unsteady. But if you want to fly, you have to be **willing to let go**. You have to let go of the safety and security that is standing on the ground.

And you have to let go of the experience that you thought that flying would be. When you think of flying, you only imagine the view from above, but the truth is that flying is a much richer and far more sensory experience than could ever be conjured by the human imagination.

As you stumble across the field, allowing yourself to be pushed and pulled by the gusts, you’re suddenly not sure that you will make it off the ground. But that’s okay. Because if you want to fly you have to be **willing to accept the outcome** that the conditions allow. Maybe you will spread your arms, and feel a breeze but your feet will never leave the soft embrace of the grass. Or perhaps you will take flight—maybe just for a minute—but with no one else there to witness, you will return to your family with glee, only for them to dismiss your tale as fallacy.

As the sharp breath of air swishes past and you feel it stinging your cheeks and pushing against your hands, the ground suddenly becomes lighter. And then you, too, suddenly become lighter. In this moment of triumph and joy and confusion, you will realize that you have absolutely no idea what you are doing. But if you want to fly, you have to be willing to **learn from your mistakes**. There is no manual. There are no checklists and there is no answer key in the back of the book. You must trust your own ability to gain lift, to steer skillfully, and to lower yourself gently.

Flying is not a singular journey with a predetermined location. You cannot force yourself on the wind—you must release yourself to it. It's an unpredictable series of tugs and lurches. But if you are willing to embrace a loss of balance, you will begin to feel the exhilaration that is flying.

And once you have tasted “flying weather,” there is no turning back.

Now, I have an admission to make. So far, each time I have spread my arms, and breathed in the sweet tropical winds, I have stayed rooted on the ground. The truth is, there is only one person under the sky who will ever know if my mom took flight. For the rest of us, she has left a small bead of possibility in a vast ocean of doubt.

But even when we were fifteen and seventeen, as the wind picked up, Kirk and I would hear a gleeful yell from downstairs – “Hey boys, it’s flying weather!” And every time without fail – even late at night– we would go outside, feel the breeze, and spread our arms. We would taste the air, we would try to surrender ourselves to the conditions, and would tell ourselves that we could fly.

I think that we can learn two things from this story. The first, is that my family is a bit crazy. But the second lesson is more important. Because if you *really* want to know how to fly, you should know that flying has very little to do with your ability to stand in an open field during hurricane force winds.

At it’s core, flying is about a willingness to believe in yourself, to trust the present moment and to lean into the winds of life.

Even in an age when we can pay to be taken up into a metal tube and flown hundreds of miles without ever leaving the comfort of the ground, Timanous has taught me that those who are willing to stand in the wind with their arms outspread and hands in the air, often live the fullest lives.

My favorite part of photographing camp is witnessing the thousands of split-second moments that happen every day along the wooded path. I believe that this place will *only* change you, if you are willing to lean into these decisive moments—to take them head on with an openness to surprise yourself.

And so the next time that you are about to face one of these moments—whether it’s telling your first story as an aid, thanking someone for their friendship in front of the whole camp, or diving off of the tower for the first time, I don’t want you to tell yourself that you’re about to bellyflop, I want you to say to yourself, “It’s flying weather.”

There is, of course, always a possibility that you will flop. But that's okay. It's never too long before the winds pick up again.

Regardless of whether you fall or fly, the story that you tell yourself in these decisive moments will decide the course of your life. And so whether it is your first summer here or your 30th, my advice to you is to spread your arms, release, and allow the spirit of this place to lift and carry you