

UP

One Man's Journey to Feminism

Peter W. Pruyn

he / him / his*

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Cover photo: 7,500 feet over Galveston Bay early on a Saturday morning. ©2020 Peter W. Pruyne.

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Content warning:
Contains descriptions of physical and emotional violence

* Pronounced “prine”. He/him/his: This is the set of pronouns I ask others to use when referring to me. People who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming may use pronouns that do not conform to binary male/female gender categorizations, such as “they, them, theirs.”

11: Brattleboro

“Creation does not merely take place once in the beginning but also at every moment throughout the whole of time.” — Martin Buber

On a short-notice vacation to Brattleboro, Vermont, as an antidote to my preference for planning, I commit to a mostly improvised visit. However, I do allow myself some brief research to see what I might do there, and the first thing I discover is that Brattleboro is home to something called the New England Center for Circus Arts. I don't really know what that means, but it sounds fun. So why not find out?

Driving into town on a Monday, I decide to make NECCA, as it's called, my first stop. At the end of a steep gravel driveway set back from the road, the building looks like a cross between a medium-sized modernist office building and an aircraft hangar. Walking inside, the rear walls of the lobby are glass, allowing you to see into a single cavernous space filled with an assortment of circus-training paraphernalia: ropes, trellises, aerial silks, mats, and nets.

I am greeted by an enthusiastic 20-something young man at the front desk. I explain that I'm in town for a week and wonder if there's anything a 51-year-old with an imperfect body could do here. Recently I've been officially welcomed into the Land of Middle Age by the shrill cry of lower-back pain, and part of me wonders if I should be doing this at all. His response is an emphatic “Absolutely!” He begins to describe two classes I might be able to take during my stay: a drop-in trampoline class (no pun intended) and Trapeze 101. Despite having been a pilot, I am actually afraid of heights, so while the trapeze sounds more adventurous, the trampoline sounds more fun. He says he'll get back to me later in the week about availability.

On Wednesday I get the news that the trampoline class is full, but I would be welcome at the trapeze class, Saturday at 3:30. After taking a deep breath, I sign-up for the class. The online schedule lists the class instructor as someone named Margaret.

As Saturday afternoon approaches, I try to remind myself to focus on having fun.

Arriving at NECCA early on Saturday, I walk into the lobby and see some figures in the open bay area beginning to set up for the class. As I approach one of the entrances, I see a woman in a purple t-shirt with a trapeze logo on it, black spandex leggings and bare feet. Walking purposefully in my direction, when she sees me looking expectantly looking into the room, she makes eye-contact and smiles.

“Hi, I'm Margaret,” she says, extending her hand. Margaret looks like she's in her mid-to-late-30s, medium height, with short, slightly spikey brown hair, and a forearm of colorful tattoos. Her outfit reminds me of a yoga instructor's, but her upper-body suggests some kind of Olympian. I introduce myself, and Margaret explains that I can wait in the lobby while she and the other instructors are setting up. As I'm the first student to arrive, I walk upstairs to a balcony that allows me to overlook the entire space.



Figure 62: The view of the trapeze setup from the balcony. The white net spans the full arc of two trapeze swings. Note the horizontal web of reinforcement lines on either side of the net. Barely visible directly in the center of the picture is the white trapeze bar just in front of the middle horizontal orange beam. At the same level towards the right end of the net is the second trapeze bar (with black rigging), just to the right of the vertical window that is the second window from the right. Note the small launching platform—“the board”—in the upper left suspended from the ceiling by two ladder-like supports. The aluminum trellis visible in the upper right is for aerial work using the multi-colored silks tied-up together on the left, which weren’t used in our class.

As I stand at the balcony railing taking-in the view, Margaret raises an orange extension ladder up to a small launch platform suspended from the ceiling, which looks about 25 feet above the ground. They refer to this platform as “the board.” She then climbs the ladder and launches herself onto the trapeze swing. Hanging from her arms, after swinging back and forth a few times she yells to the other instructors down below, “I’m testing the net!”

“O.K.!” , one of them yells back.

Near the upper part of her swing, Margaret lets go of the trapeze and falls with her back facing downwards towards the net. And then I notice something interesting. As she lands and the net gently absorbs her body, I notice that her eyes are wide open, looking straight up at the ceiling. Her expression is completely placid. At the moment of impact she looks fully present, no doubt allowing her to gauge the effectiveness of the net using the whole of her body.

I reflect that usually in life the act of falling is something to be avoided: something awkward, tense, embarrassing, even hurtful. One memory from my own childhood would be of falling backwards off a swimming dock into a lake while holding my nose as tightly as I could, clenching my eyes shut as hard as I could, and holding my body stiff as a board while bracing for the impact of the water.

The fall I’ve just witnessed is something entirely different: it was art.

Part of me wants to make note of what I’m seeing, while another part is wincing at the thought that I’m going to be the one doing any of this later.

Having landed precisely in the middle of the net, Margaret now makes her way to the edge and grasps two handles sewn into the edge with her hands. A fraction of a second later, she has effortlessly flipped head-first over the side of the net and is now standing upright on the ground, about six feet below the net. Another occasion to wince: I’m concerned if I’ll be able to do that with my back the way it is.

I return to the waiting area downstairs and greet some of the other arriving students. There’s a mother and two of her teenage daughters with a younger friend. The girls look about 17, 15 and 13. Trying to make conversation, I ask if they’ve done this before. I find out that the two older girls have, while the younger one says she has not. Then there’s what looks like a six-year-old boy, a seven-year-old girl with her younger brother who looks about six, and two mothers equipped with cameras.

I confess some relief when two other adult students eventually arrive, a man and a woman. They both look in their 40s. Given their spandex outfits, I’m guessing they’ve also done this before. In fact, I’m the only one in street clothes. I empty the pockets of my jeans, take off my sneakers and socks, and store them in one of the wooden student cubby-holes provided. I take my camera and water bottle with me.

The main door to the bay opens, and Margaret and the other instructors invite us into the training area. We stand in a loose circle on a series of thick blue mats, and Henry, an affable man who looks in his 40s, first gives us an important safety rule: *do not walk under the net*. The reason is that when someone falls on the net, it compresses. You don’t want to be underneath when that happens. Margaret then asks us to introduce ourselves by sharing four things: our first name, our experience with trapeze, what we’re working on today, and our favorite animal. I have to chuckle at the last item, but given the number of kids in the room, I understand. The instructors also introduce themselves. In addition to Margaret, she will be helped today by Henry, a younger guy named Ben who looks like he’s been working out even more than Margaret, and a young woman named Abby.

When it gets to my turn, I say, “My name is Peter.” Besides the fact that I’m about to fling myself off a platform however-many-feet in the air, this feels like the first day of kindergarten. “I’ve never done anything close to this in my life, so ... I guess I’m working on showing up.” At that, Margaret stifles a laugh. “And for my favorite animal, I think I’ll go with ... a dolphin.” Henry responds with “Nice!”

After introductions, Margaret announces that we’re going to do some warm-up exercises. We

spread out in a line on the blue mats facing Margaret. She starts off with 20 jumping jacks—fast. I can't remember that last time I did jumping jacks. Margaret is doing them so quickly it takes until she's at about ten for me to get in-sync with her. We proceed to go through a dozen or so stretches and yoga-like poses. Throughout, my back is preventing me from doing much of any bending over. Margaret is like a pretzel. I'm more like a pretzel stick. *Should I be doing this?*

Next, we are each fitted with a heavy safety belt. The belts are partly a wide, nylon web and partly thick padding with two carabineers on either side. In addition to the net, we will be protected from falling at all times by two black safety lines that hook onto the two carabineers on the belt. I overhear Henry say something to Margaret about putting on my belt, and he comes over and straps me in. You want the belt to be tight enough so that it begins to push back at a full breath. It's snug.

After our belts are on, we break into two groups of students: those who have done this before and beginners. Henry takes us four beginners off to the side—the seven-year-old girl, her younger brother, the 13-year-old girl, and me—as the more advanced students start their training. It is not lost on me that I am the oldest in the group—that's including the instructor. It will take me a little longer to realize that I'm also the oldest one in the whole class, and, for that matter, the entire building.

We stand next to a static trapeze bar hanging from the ceiling that comes up to about my chest. Henry explains that when we get up to the board, the instructor there will hold on to the rear of our belt. They will then pull the trapeze bar close enough to us so that we can first grab it with our right hand while we are still holding onto the platform stay with our left. We will then move our left hand to the bar as well. At this point we will have our toes out over the edge of the platform, and the instructor will say "Ready!" Henry points out that this is a command, not a question. At "Ready!", we are supposed to bend our knees, thrust our hips back, and lean forward towards the bar. This requires your body to make a modified 'C' shape. He demonstrates with each of us on the mat. I find it extremely awkward to put my weight on my heels, while pushing my hips back, while also reaching forward for the bar. It requires rotating my pelvis in a way that is completely alien to me.

After we are in the ready-position, the instructor will then give us the command, "Hup!" Henry defines "Hup!" as a made-up circus word that means "Do the thing!" At that point we step forward off the board while holding onto the trapeze just as the instructor will let go of our belt from behind.

In my head I celebrate the existence of the word "Hup!" while simultaneously cringing at how it will be used today. Meanwhile, there is a lot of yelling going on behind us as the more advanced students are being put through their paces on the trapeze. Several times Henry says to the kids, "Look at me! I can't compete with what they're doing over there." Personally, I'm torn between wanting to look and feeling too scared to look.

Next, Henry explains that once we're swinging on the trapeze, we will put our legs over the bar. *What?!* He asks the 13-year-old girl if she would like to demonstrate what he means on the static trapeze bar behind us. The girl first hangs from the bar with her hands, does a scissor-like move with her legs to point them straight up, effortlessly curls her legs over the bar, and ends up hanging upside down from the bar like a bat. Clearly, she's done this before. Hey, wait a minute! I thought this was supposed to be the beginners group?

My reaction is visceral: *I'm not doing that.* I need to tell Henry. I'll feel lucky if I can just get up to the board and swing once.

When I share my feelings with Henry, he is completely understanding and reassures us that each of us can do exactly what we feel comfortable doing and nothing more. I also add that I'm concerned about my back, and Henry acknowledges that he noticed that while we were doing the warm-ups. He doesn't think it will be a problem, however, because you hang from the bar with your arms. He does say that he has a special way he's going to help me dismount from the net, which he will show me later. It feels good that he was paying attention enough to me to notice and have suggestions to help.

Finally, Henry explains how we're going to dismount from the trapeze. First, Margaret will give us the command "Toes up!" The goal is to fall onto your back like Margaret did earlier. To minimize the chances of your toes getting caught in the net, you point them upwards. The next command will be "Release!", timed to be given as you reach the apex of your swing. This allows you to fall back-first. Ideally, you also want to fold your arms as you're falling so your fingers don't get caught in the net, either.

After Henry finishes this explanation, he asks if there are any questions. I share with him that up until this year I would have described myself as being afraid of heights. More recently, however, I've realized that it's more accurate to say that I have a very sensitive vestibular system which, for the majority of my life, has used the perception of the ground in my peripheral vision to calibrate a sense of level. At height, that level surface reference is lost, however, and that's what's extremely disturbing for me. So what I've learned to do, instead, is to focus intently on whatever is right in front of me.

Having listened to all this, Henry responds immediately with "Perfect! That's exactly what you should do." I feel validated, if not completely at ease.

"Let's go over here." Henry leads us to a stack of blue mats near the base of the ladder that make a natural bench for us to sit on as we now wait our turn. *Am I really going to do this?* We need to choose an order. "I'm happy to go last," I say. How magnanimous of me. The experienced older girl goes first.

As we wait our turn, I watch the more advanced students. The other younger boy is climbing up the ladder to the board like a squirrel. Do little kids have a sense of fear? I don't know whether to admire him or hate him.

I watch how the instructors, much like a cockpit crew, are carefully coordinating and communicating their support of the students. Once up on the board, Ben hooks the student up to the two black safety lines. The lines go up to a pulley attached to the ceiling and then down to Margaret who holds the other end of the lines standing by the side of the net while looking up. If a student falls, with a slight pull on the safety lines she is able to slow or even stop the student's descent towards the net. As a result, she's watching everything that's going on above like a hawk.

Once the student is hooked-up to their safety lines, Ben pulls the trapeze bar in towards him with a long silver hook, allowing the student to grab it. Just as Henry said, Ben then gives the command of "Ready!" followed by "Hup!", and the student leaves the board and swings out over the net. Once they are flying, Margaret takes charge of coaching the student, all while moving the safety lines as needed to minimize their drag on the student as they swing.

Margaret is yelling all her coaching commands to the students, I assume for two reasons. First, the student is some 20 or 30 feet above, and she wants to make sure that she's loud enough to be heard. But I'm guessing she's also yelling because perception narrows under stress, and she wants to make sure her words are getting through.

There is something unusual, however, about the particular way she's yelling that draws my attention.

When I hear most coaches yell at their athletes, they typically sound annoyed or angry. The result is that their critiques often feel berating or shaming. This isn't how Margaret is coming across at all. The most common thing she yells to students is, "Look at the bar!" Yet no matter what she's yelling, it doesn't sound like "Look at the bar, *you idiot!*" Instead, her calls engender a reaction more like, "Oh, yes! That's exactly what I should be doing now. Thanks, Margaret!" This isn't about power, control, ego, or winning. There's something about her tone and inflection that convey a steadfast intention to support you while still clearly standing in authority. All the while the laws of physics are in-play, demanding that she give these commands with split-second timing.

Margaret is caring with surgical precision.

Whenever a student has a success, the small audience of instructors and other students down below break into an applause of sympathetic joy for whatever accomplishment they've just witnessed.

No red rubber balls will be hurled at me in this gymnasium. If there is anything here to dodge, it is merely my own self-doubt. In my current state of apprehension, it will take a little longer for me to realize: in this activity, the joy is what it's all about.

The 13-year-old girl in our group goes. It looks like she's done this her whole life. No hesitation, great form—as far as this beginner can tell. As she swings, Margaret coaches her through hanging by her legs just as she demonstrated earlier on the practice bar. This is beginning to remind me of going to a ski resort as a beginner adult and seeing a Scandinavian family of little kids ski circles around me like they're going for a stroll in a park. It is profoundly humbling.

To manage my anxiety, I start trying to use four self-calming techniques I teach clients: focusing on diaphragmatic breathing; slowly moving the soft palette in the upper rear of my mouth up and down; staring straight ahead while focusing my attention on what I can see in my peripheral vision; and trying to relax the muscles on the floor of my pelvis. I rotate through each of them in a serial fashion, with mediocre effectiveness.

It then occurs to me to ask Henry to tell Margaret that I'm only going to swing on the bar. I don't need Margaret giving me commands about hanging by my legs when I'm not going to follow them. He nods, walks over to Margaret 15 feet away, and whispers in her ear. I notice, however, that he stays a little bit longer than it would take to say, "Peter's just going to swing." I can't help but think that he's adding something like, "Oh, and he's also scared out of his wits, so ... ya might wanna keep an eye on 'im!"

As the other two smaller kids in my group go, I try to make small-talk with the only older man in the class. Apparently he's been doing this a little while and is working up to being caught in mid-air. He shares that he came to this with a background as a house painter, so he has a lot of experience being at the top of tall ladders. I laugh, but inside I'm envious. I don't have that experience.

The little boy in our group is about to finish. It's my turn.

I approach the orange extension ladder. I grab both sides of it and try to put my foot on the first rung. While I don't have much experience climbing extension ladders, I have precisely zero experience climbing them in bare feet. I quickly learn that the arch of your foot is not good for bearing weight. I carefully find the spot under the ball of my foot that works better on these narrow aluminum rungs.

Just as I'm figuring that out, something else begins to happen: the ladder starts to wobble. It's flexing in and out with each step. *I don't like this.* I slow down to try and dampen the oscillation. And just as I'm figuring that out, I reach the middle third of the ladder where the upper and lower halves of the extension ladder over-lap. Now I have two adjacent rungs to step on at a time, a much wider target for each footfall. *That little kid did this without even thinking. Why is this so hard for me?*

The higher I go, the louder and more frequent the voice of doubt gets. *I do not like this. I do not like this at all.*

Focus on the rung in front of you.

I try and use the four relaxation exercises I was using before, but stop short of trying to focus on my peripheral vision. What's in the periphery and below me now is no longer my friend.

Breathe, Peter.

Halfway up the ladder, a dark thought enters my mind: *I don't think I can do this.*

Just breathe. Look at the rung in front of you.

I want to turn around.

Breathe with your diaphragm. That's it

Look at the next rung.

With only a few more feet to go, another abrupt change: I transition from the double rungs where the two halves of the ladder overlapped, back to the single rungs of the top third of the ladder. Not wanting to look down to re-position my foot, I feel around for the center of the rung beneath me.

This is close to overwhelming for me. To moderate the overwhelm, I start to take one rung at a time, like how I went downstairs in nursery school.

Breathe. Almost there

My head is now level with the board, and I transition one hand from the ladder to the platform's support. With the next step, I grasp the support with both hands. Pulling myself up off the ladder, I'm now standing on the aluminum platform with Ben, holding onto the ladder-like stay that the board hangs from. *Don't look down.*

You don't have to believe you can get to the top of a ladder to get to the top of the ladder. All you have to believe is that you can get to the next rung.

Ben greets me with a pleasant smile. I'm guessing I look the opposite. He asks enthusiastically, "How are you doing?!"

I answer honestly in a muted monotone: "Way out of my comfort zone."

Ben responds with a good-natured laugh and a nod of deep understanding. He says, "That's good. It's good to get out of your comfort zone every once in a while." While I agree in-principle, in this moment I have no rejoinder.

As he starts to hook me up to the black safety lines, he continues the small-talk. I'm guessing he's shepherded hundreds of terrified first-timers through this moment.

"So, what made you want to take the class?", he asks casually.

"Well, I was in town for a week for vacation and figured, 'Why not?'"

"Right on!" Another big smile from him. Another wide-eyed, stoic gaze from me. *Don't look down. Breathe*

Pointing to the ladder-like stay, he says, "Move over to the other side of this." I gingerly step to the center of the board where he is. A rectangle of blue carpet covers the aluminum platform big enough for both of us to stand on.

"You're doing great!"

He grabs the rear of my safety belt and says with certainty, "I've got you." I feel his firm tug.

"Put your toes over the edge." I step slowly to the edge of the board, positioning the balls of my feet at the edge with my toes sticking out beyond it. The net feels very far away down below.

Focus on your toes, not the net.

Meanwhile, Ben has grabbed the trapeze bar with the hook and pulls it in close so I can grab onto it. The bar is wider and thinner in diameter than I might have imagined. Unlike the chin-up bar of my youth, it's much longer than the width of my shoulders and slightly smaller in diameter, allowing you to wrap your fingers all the way around it.

While I'm still holding onto the platform stay with my left hand, Ben is using his weight to pull on the back of my belt. At the same time I reach out for the bar with my right arm. It's just out of reach. I'm straining.

Just at that moment, Margaret's voice comes from below: "Move your left hand up!"

Of course. That's just what I needed. My left hand had been holding on to the stay closer to waist-level. Moving it up to shoulder-level allows my left arm to reach full extension, allowing me to reach the bar with my right. *Margaret's got my back.*

Finally grabbing the bar, I notice that it is covered with a very rough-textured white adhesive tape. It's like industrial-strength crepe paper. The tape is wrapped in a perfectly uniform spiral across the bar. In addition, the diagonal spiraling edge of the tape has an additional roughness to it, giving even more texture to hold on to. Someone took a lot of care to do all that, just so.

Once my right hand is firmly gripping the right side of the bar, Ben points to the left side of the bar and says, "Put your left hand here."

Letting go of the vertical stay with my left hand, I grab the bar with both hands. I'm now in that very awkward 'C'-shape that I tried to practice earlier with Henry.

"Hips back." I move what I think are my hips back, but apparently it's not what he's looking

for. This is really hard.

“Hips back,” he gently repeats. I move in some other way that is slightly different than before. With my toes over the edge, Ben pulling back on my belt, and my arms pulled way out in front of me beyond the edge, it’s extremely awkward for me.

“That’s it!” *Just hold it, just ... like ... that.*

Gripping the bar like my life depends on it, my knuckles are as white as the adhesive tape.

“Ready!”

Bend at the knees. No thinking, just doing.

“Hup!”

Ben lets go of my belt, and I step off out into space.



Figure 63: Almost there Note that above the far end of the net is a large silver horizontal bar. Just visible above that bar hanging from the ceiling is an orange stuffed-animal gorilla with both arms up. Somebody's got a sense of humor. At this moment, he's having a lot more fun than I am! This sequence of pictures is from my second pass with Abby on the board. (All photos of me here are by Audrey Hyvonen.)



Figure 64: “Ready!” Note how Abby is leaning back to pull back on my belt. Note also the black safety lines going forward from my safety belt.



Figure 65: “Hup!”



Figure 66: A new kind of flying. And, yes, my back and I survived the soft landing, twice.

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