

This is it. This is the last day of my life, Shirley Dygert thought to herself on a Saturday afternoon. It was August 1, 2009, and here she was hurtling through the air from 13,500 feet and picking up speed at a scary rate. This was her first time skydiving—she had done it on the recommendation of her son, Joe, y’know to bring some excitement to her boring middle-aged life—but now it also seemed like this would be the last time she’d ever get to go skydiving. She kept thinking to herself, *I can’t believe this is happening. There was still so much to do.*

Her son, Joe, was now all grown up, had landed a great job, and now she’d never get to meet his future wife . . . never know his children. Then there was her other son, Will, who was watching everything from the ground with his children—her grandchildren—Brad, 6; Caylon, 4; Lexi, an infant. Shirley just wanted to find them on the ground, hold out her hand to them and say, “It’s O.K. It’s O.K.” Suddenly, only one thing mattered now—*Oh God, I don’t want my kids to have to see this!* she thought. *Please don’t let my grandkids see this!* There was also her husband, Bill—and after more than thirty years of marriage, how could they be apart now?

This wasn’t how the day was supposed to go. She was made to believe skydiving was safe—surprisingly safe. The vast majority of problems that can go wrong are fixable. The statistics say you’re more likely to die from a bee sting or a lightning strike than skydiving. In 2008, the previous year, out of 2.6 million jumps, apparently there were only 30 fatalities. And for tandem jumps like this one, the rate was even lower—only 0.0003% of jumpers died. But as Shirley plummeted fast toward the Houston dirt, it sure looked as if she’d be the exception to the rule.

Meeting her tandem instructor Dave Hartsock for the first time, she was a little nervous. Dave was a tall, fortyish man, a thick parachute strapped to his shoulders. She managed to ask him, “How many times have you done this?” But Dave smiled, and answered reassuringly, “A lot.” In fact, this would be his seventh jump since 9 a.m. that morning—so Shirley was a little more at ease.

So, up they went. Dave checked and rechecked his buckles at the four contact points. After more than 800 jumps, it was almost a reflex. Long ago, he’d gotten over his nerves. So, reaching 13,500 feet, Dave turned to Shirley and gave her the quick rundown. They’d spin three times so she could see up to forty miles away. Then, he’d pull the chute at 5,000 feet, and they’d settle into a gentle glide. The whole thing would take two-three minutes, but feel five times as long. Now, staring at the open door, Shirley found herself saying, “I feel like I’m going to be sucked right out.” And grabbing a carabiner, Dave hooked himself to her harness and said, “You’re not going anywhere without me.”

Together, the two of them crossed their arms over their chests, kept their legs close together, and counted to three before dropping. Leaving the plane, Shirley’s heart was pounding, when all she could see was vast Texas sky. Her forehead tightened, her cheeks peeling back, as she felt her body accelerate to 51 mph in just three seconds. And after nine seconds, she and Dave had reached 120 mph, terminal velocity. As she’d been instructed, she let her arms and legs curl behind her, going belly first, so that Dave would have control over the dive.

Time began to slow. Shirley could see houses, barns, a golf course. She suddenly got so cold she shivered. They now passed seven thousand feet. Finally, Shirley allowed herself to breathe, to take it all in. It was beautiful—such a view! Shirley was excited—she was actually doing it!

Next, at five thousand feet, Dave pulled the main chute. Once the canopy was as it should be, it would be smooth sailing all the way down. But, as Dave pulled the rip cord, he instantly knew something was wrong. A parachute release can be jarring, but this, well, this was different. It was a violent jerk and a loud POP! from above. He tried to look up, but he was already spinning—once, twice, then dozens of times—faster and faster. Usually, opening the chute slows you down from 120 mph to 20 mph. But instead, they were both plummeting and twirling. And Dave knew the danger that if you spin too fast for too long, you can black out, which means no one would be able to pull the reserve parachute when it came time.

Quickly, Dave had an idea—all he had to do was cut away the main chute and deploy the reserve. He closed his eyes to better focus, and maneuvered his hand to grasp the cutaway handle. Only problem was—the handle wasn't there.

Meanwhile, Shirley was getting worried. It had been more than the three expected spins, and she could hear Dave grunting in desperation. "Is it supposed to be like this?" she shouted. "No," Dave yelled back. "To be honest, we got a serious problem. But I got it." With every second, they spun faster—the world became a blur. Spinning like a top, plummeting toward the ground, she quietly prayed, *God, please, help David.*

Cut away the canopy, that's all Dave was thinking. Normally, it was easy—just reach over and pull the handle . . . but that was the handle that wasn't there. Sure, there was another cutaway handle, but it was being blocked by Shirley's body. And as they now dropped past four thousand feet, Dave knew time was running out—he had roughly twenty seconds—just *twenty* seconds!—until the point of no return. After 1,500 feet, opening parachutes doesn't do much good.

There was only one more option left. At 3,500 feet Dave pulled the reserve chute. Smaller than the regular canopies, he knew it wouldn't do the trick—but it would at least slow them down, stop the spinning, and buy him some more time to think. The packet shot up behind him and expanded. And for a moment, calm returned—100 mph quickly slowed to 60 mph. Their spin also slowed—*Maybe, we'll get out of this*, Dave thought.

Regaining her sense of equilibrium, Shirley felt a jolt . . . and then another acceleration. Above her the two canopies, hungry for air, had swung violently to opposite sides. They were now in a downplane, roughly horizontal—becoming like two wings that were flying Dave and Shirley straight at the ground. Their speed returned, jumping from 60 mph back to more than 100 mph. Desperately, Dave grabbed at the lines. He needed to stop the downplane—he twisted and pulled, but barely reduced their speed, and what was worse, they were spinning again. The time to try to fix the canopy was over—it was finally time to start looking at the ground.

So, as they reached 750 feet, Shirley in front and Dave behind her, Shirley started thinking about her mom who'd died of cancer nine years before. She thought about how they'd see each other soon. She also thought of her father who died by age 66. Shirley felt a warmth—she'd see him again soon too. They'd now hit one hundred feet—she could see individual bushes, fences—"This is how I'm going to die," she thought. The yellow grass got closer—Shirley prepared herself. That's when Dave shouted into her ear.

"Shirley, I want you to pull up your legs *now!*" he said. "Get ready for a really rough landing." And with that, as she kicked, Shirley felt herself twist upright. Behind her, Dave pulled down hard on the two canopy lines, dislocating his shoulders. At the same time, he kicked his own legs up, inverting their positions. By doing so, he selflessly, substitutionally, sacrificially hit the Texas dirt first, softening Shirley's landing.

He became for her a sort of human cushion—putting himself between the hard ground and the strange woman he'd met just a half hour ago. The impact was so loud, it could be heard a quarter mile away. But miraculously, just moments later, Shirley opened her eyes, then blinked. Above her, she could see light and sky and clouds. But underneath her, she felt the inert form of Dave Hartsock. ⁱ

Your name and my name might as well be Shirley. Can't you feel it—each one of us dropping so fast, plummeting to our deaths? I mean, what about that guilt, that shame, that disgrace that weighs on you, pushing hard on you? How about the gravitational pull on your body as you age, dragging you down? Do you ever get that sinking feeling like I do—y'know, the one in the pit of your stomach at the prospect of someday having to face God?

Since Adam and Eve, you and I, all of us, we have been caught in freefall—theologians call it The Fall. And the moment will come when it's all gonna hit like a ton of bricks. Worst part is, like Shirley, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—you or I can do about it. We're all just stuck—no chute to pull, no handle to grab, there isn't anything that can help us. Each one of us is headed straight for a crash landing—call it eternal death, hell, the wrath of God, whatever—and all we can do is brace ourselves for it.

But like Shirley, just as we're coming to grips with this sad, scary reality. Just as we're thinking, *So, this is it. I can't believe this is happening. Soon enough, it's all over for me;* just as we're preparing ourselves for the inevitable, our bodies curled up and our eyes squeezed tight, waiting for impact, out of nowhere, someone grabs a carabiner, hooks themselves to our harness and says, "You're not going anywhere without me."

This surprise moment is what we in the Church call The Baptism of Our Lord. It's when we all first realized we weren't in this alone—that this was a tandem dive. Into our fallen state, here comes none other than the Holy One Himself. Stripping down to His skivvies to take the plunge, we find Him to be just like one of us, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. But then, splashing into the Jordan River—with the regrets, and the remorse, and the repentance floating around in there—Jesus is also sin of our sin. The sinless Son of God is baptized like a common sinner. He who knew no sin became sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God.

Anxiously, we look over at Jesus with eager eyes, and we ask, "Is it supposed to be like this?" "To be honest," He says, "we got a serious problem. But I got it." Spinning out of control, picking up speed, our time is running out. We can start to make out individual bushes and fences, the yellow grass is getting closer—the valley of the shadow of death and the gates of hell grow bigger before us. And just when we're accepting our fate—something happens—Jesus inverts positions.

Selflessly, substitutionally, sacrificially, Jesus hit that dirt for us first, softening our landing. Bearing our sin on the cross, He became a sort of human cushion—getting between us and what we had comin'. The impact of that one moment was so loud, it could be heard in the temple as the curtain was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth shook, the rocks split, and the tombs broke open. But miraculously, you and I have opened our eyes, then blinked. And above us, we can see the light of everlasting life. But underneath, we feel the body of our Savior.

So, what happened to Shirley? Would you believe she survived without any long-term effects—"Good as new" she told one reporter? And Dave, he was a goner for sure, right? Well, crazy as it sounds, that wasn't the end for him either—he's confined to a wheelchair, but Dave lives on.

Believe it or not, even after a fall like that, Jesus also lives on—He might have some scars—but He was raised from the dead, ascended into heaven, and even now is exalted at the right hand of God the Father. And because He is your Savior, if you ever feel your stomach drop again, if it ever seems like you're falling, don't worry—it can only be a nightmare. Like a bad dream, you will never actually hit—you always wake up first. Because forever beneath you, is your baptized, crucified, and risen Lord eternally ready to catch you.

ⁱ Story based on "A First-time Skydiving Experience, a Fall to Earth and a Terrible Accident" by Chris Ballard in *Sports Illustrated*, July 28, 2014.