



wind and will

Paragliding champion Jill Nephew can fly. She does it with fabric, rope, and a remarkable ability to communicate with air. **ELIOT FINTUSHEL** Photography by Trish Tunney



IN HER DREAM, the child can fly. It's simply a trick of the mind, a certain psychological angle of attack. In the most diverse situations, dull or fantastic, she delights in discovering that angle, spreading her arms, and leaping into the sky. Beyond her will, however, is the rapturous dreamscape itself, all-embracing, "alive, full of the beauty of Ugly and the beauty of Dark," that drips and runs like wet paint if she defiles it with wanting. Waking, she tries to describe that beauty, words fail her, and she begins to cry.

But one day, grown up now, with eyes wide open, she runs and leaps off a cliff in Dunlap, California—and falls up. The mystic dreamscape quickens her bones,

and her eyes tear. The air loves her. It swells the polychrome canopy, her sail, as she soars nearly to the clouds in a subtle conversation with the wind, a conversation in a language of squints and tucks and tugs on nylon cords.

"Can I ask you a question, Wind?"

"I've got nowhere to be. You can ask me all the questions you want."

Paragliding champion Jill Nephew is a tall, athletically-built woman in her mid-thirties with red hair and an intelligent face that sometimes lapses into a mischievous half-smile. She has had her share of close calls. Ten years ago she was nearly annihilated by a rock coming up at her as she spiraled in freefall, her glider collapsed, her arms pressed to her sides by four or five Gs amped up by angular momentum. Barely able to reach for the emergency parachute tucked under her hips, she felt her toe hit rock, and just then the chute swelled and pulled her skyward.

In another scrape, Jill was flying in a spot well known for the kindness of its air—"Everyone *knew* it was safe, safe, safe." It was the day after the 2001 World Air Games in the Andalusia region of Spain, where she had been a member of the American team. A cloud collapsed, creating a fifty-mile-an-hour wind that drove her down into a thicket of trees—limb-shattering, flesh-ripping trees—and she managed to survive by lightning-fast maneuvers and calculations accelerated by floods of adrenaline.

Jill and I met at a coffeehouse one afternoon. Jill, who had taken a theater class of mine a decade earlier, had just moved back to Santa Rosa, California, her old town, where I still live and teach. She looked me up, we shot

the breeze, and it wasn't long before the conversation hit a thermal. Up we went, but between the sky-high vistas—the rock, the trees.

"I almost got killed," she told me. "The wind finally broke my spirit. I felt like it was trying to break me and break me and break me. I'd yell at it and cuss at it and wish I didn't care."

It was a bad patch, three years of it, when everywhere Jill spread her wing, bad air came out of nowhere. Three flying clubs actually told her to stay away. "You're the jinx," they said, "when you're in the air everything goes to shit." When she talks about that time, Jill's face darkens: "It hurt that it might be true, that the air hates me, that the air gave me so much, and all of a sudden took it away. I felt so emptied."

One night, alone in her hostel room just a week after the disaster in Andalusia, lucid dreams came to her. Childhood apnea had kept her awake nights and taught her how to fly in her dreams, but the dream flights had stopped when she'd begun to fly for real—till now. Next morning—just before the Nordic Open to be held near Avila, Spain—Jill found herself talking to the wind for the first time: "What do you want?"

"Fly without instruments today," it told her.

AT THE BEGINNING, flyers have no fear. The third year is often the best, Jill says, "because you're so full of love with so little fear, and it's really visceral when you've

Contributing editor Eliot Fintushel's last essay for Tricycle, "The Merry Greis," a profile of Manfred Clynes, appeared in the Summer 2006 issue.

been flying through a lot of shit. When I say ‘flying without fear,’ I mean that you can stop shaking and breathe normally.” Later on, fear clouds your judgment. Fear controls the choices. A flyer starts seeing monsters in the air. A sudden eddy, a jerk on the line—everything wants to kill you. Against all that, there’s some high tech: electronic devices, global positioning systems, vario-altimeter, push-to-talk transceivers with helmet-mounted microphones, and so on. But it’s still just basically you and the wind.

Paragliding culture, like military culture, promotes a certain kind of self-deception. The imminence of death is willfully ignored, blotted out by bravado or by a jocular posture. Never mind that vomiting, a racing heart, and brusque distemper are nearly universal among competitive flyers before launch, it’s bad form to point out the obvious: *memento mori*. On this account, Jill Nephew, the pilots’ Diogenes, implacable straight-shooter, has been the cause of some displeasure.

boy, Robby, launch into the wind, then get blown back “into something that looked really nasty.” She started to pace and become really upset, “you know, because I hate watching people who are about to die.” Meanwhile, the Tibetan laughed and laughed. Maybe he was stoned. Maybe it was really sublime, transcendent—but all Jill saw was a poor village kid who had gotten in over his head. Had the Tibetan let go of something that Jill was still grasping, or was he simply, monumentally insensitive? Things turned out okay for Robby, but, for Jill, it remained a live issue: what is this grasping?

A trained meteorologist, Jill began conducting a seminar this spring for paragliders in the San Francisco Bay area. She talks a lot about listening and about lying. A pilot has to listen with her bones, her skin, her mind, and to respond justly, without wishful thinking or desire—else death or dismemberment lurk. “If I want to push it and make it into something else, I know where

“There’s a part of us that knows what we’re actually about to get ourselves into, but the trick is learning how to listen to that part of us.”

In 2004, on the way to a competition at Ellsinore, California, famous for its dirt biking, crystal meth, and treacherous air, Jill shared a car with a new pilot, a fellow with twenty or thirty hours of airtime. Incredulously, she asked him, “You’re gonna fly here?”

Of course he was.

“You know, every few years people like you think you can fly here, new pilots, but pretty soon one of you is going to crash and die or break yourself really bad, and then you’re gonna back off. You shouldn’t fly here. Go fly somewhere else.”

The others in the car tried to smooth over Jill’s harsh words. Never mind the zealot, they said. Go with your instincts. You’ll be okay. Another flyer even spread out the kid’s gear for him and showed him where to launch. The new pilot’s time came: he fell, broke both femurs, and was carried away on a stretcher.

In India once, in the company of a Tibetan flyer who did prayer flights for the monks, Jill watched a local

that leads.” A thicket of trees in Spain. A carnivorous jutting rock. If one could just get rid of all the grasping . . .

My turbulence, I told Jill at the Santa Rosa coffee-house, has all been between my ears or behind my breastbone. I’ve folded my legs and faced the wall to learn to stop grasping so hard. My clouds have been koans. My thermals have been twenty-five-thousand-year-old sayings. Jill is no stranger to this realm—she spent a few years, between high school and college, doing Gurdjieff work with a group in Sebastopol, California. However, the goad that acts on her as a flyer is imminent *physical* catastrophe, and her grasping involves muscles, blood, and bones. Is this more real? Less?

PARAGLIDING HAS BEEN AROUND since the 1960s, the result of improvements in parachute design and the innovation of ram-air technique, in which passing air swells the canopy. It differs from hang gliding in that it uses no rigid structure but rather just ropes and a piece

of cloth (albeit very highly refined ropes and cloth). Four or five thousand pilots paraglide in the United States. There are paragliding magazines and instructional videos, clubs, schools, pilot rating systems, and organized competitions. (Jill Nephew won the British Women's National Championship in 1998 and the United States Women's Championship in 1999.)

Paragliding pilots fly subject to FAA rules, which limit, for example, how close you can fly to a cloud. Flying conservatively with good, well-maintained equipment, it is quite possible to paraglide safely, but every year there are mishaps, crippling injuries—broken legs and backs, most often, injuries to pelvis and chest next, then arms, then head and face—and deaths, sixty dead since 1991.

Jill herself has been through both the bravado and through the fear: the Scylla and Charybdis of flying. “We lie to ourselves about the air,” she says. “There’s a part of us that knows what we’re actually about to get ourselves into, but the trick is learning how to listen

and the gravel in the right of way. Above it, warm air shimmered and rose.

“But now you also mean listening to yourself.”

She smiled her pretty, asymmetrical smile: “I don’t make a distinction.”

ANYTHING CAN BE A CLUE to the will of the wind—shifting patterns of sunlight, as the warming earth sends thermals spiraling, the path of a bird, a cloud formation, a breeze aslant the cheek—or an intuition, plain and simple, inexplicable as a familiar smell and just as real. But between the listening and the response there’s room for a fatal confusion. “Most of my friends have broken their backs already,” Jill told me, “and a good number are dead.”

At first, the flyers at the San Francisco seminar resist Jill’s approach. “Air junkies,” they call themselves, and their argot is borrowed from the language of sex and drugs: “Gotta get some,” they’ll say, or “I’m jonesing to



All in a day's work

Paraglider Jill Nephew, shown here in Pacifica, CA, is a trained meteorologist and has won championships at home and abroad.

to that part of us.” After her own invincible third-year ebullience, Jill retreated into a cocoon of “me, me, me.” She likens the experience to a hall of mirrors: “Everything in the air—there was nothing there anymore but just me, everything *I* do getting in the way. My choice was not to trust, to *see*. I always compulsively flew *into* the wind; it’s not safer or more dangerous than flying downwind. I just wouldn’t ever believe the wind was going to take me anyplace I wanted to be. It had come down to my character.” Everything was so simplified in flying: “You’re up or you’re down.” How, she wondered, had desire come to displace listening?

“Now wait a minute,” I said. “At first, you meant listening to the wind . . .”

“That’s right: listening to the wind . . .”

Our coffee was cold. We had moved to a table outside. The noon-high sun heated the nearby railroad tracks

fly,” or “I’m getting air horny.”

When Jill asks them if they lie to themselves, the first response is a vociferous, phallic “no.” It’s the culture. Jill got a crash course in that aspect of flying—the cowboy spirit—outside Ellsinore in a sort of outlaw hang gliding culture: trailers, mobile homes, beer, guns, and drugs. It’s a deadly site to fly—the sea breeze converging with land air in rough, chaotic patterns. One fellow there was like a Frankenstein monster, Jill recalls, full of scars and metal plates, always cut up and drugged to the eyeballs. She had a boyfriend there for a while, a star hang gliding pilot who loved her because she flew hard—that is, without fear. When she started listening a little more and daring a little less, his ardor cooled.

The cowboys at Jill’s seminar do come around at last. They start to listen to the truth of their own experience. Jill is, after all, a trained meteorologist, every flyer’s dream companion. Notwithstanding joneses and



Preparing for flight

Nephew prefers sites like this old landfill site in Pacifica, called The Dumps. "People don't like other people dangling from fabric over their heads in parks and such."

bravado, nobody wants to die. The all-too-human is amplified in flying. Tantrums abound—earth-pounding, bottle-kicking, screaming tantrums. Even the best pilots “bomb out,” then, feeling like the biggest loser in the world, stare at everybody still aloft. Jill tells of a time she sank out, when, oblivious to everything but her apparent failure, she screamed and cussed all the way to the earth—where she was greeted by a bevy of grinning pilots who had heard every word of it. No dissembling possible, Jill Nephew, down from the clouds and human as anybody, had to grin along.

It’s not just the fragility of the flesh that makes the flyers finally hear Jill’s warning. They all know that the key to beautiful flight is precisely the kind of listening, and *seeing*—dispassionate and objective—toward which Jill, their colleague, points them. They long, like Jill, to be *taken away* by the sky, and for that they must still the internal chatter, be open to surprises, and give themselves completely to the sky, not to some idea of

tel in a singular, resolute state of mind. The competitions often start with some social maneuvering among the pilots trying to hitch a ride up to the launch site, but she had no patience for that game; she set off on her own with a bottle of water and her glider in a backpack. “If you have water, you’re okay,” she says. “You can sleep in your glider, you can hide out under the trees. A friend of mine used to say, ‘In my backpack? It’s my best friend. I carry him up; he carries me down.’”

Obedient to the wind, no GPS to tell her where she was, no beeping digital vario to tell her how high, how fast, no radio umbilicus, Jill jumped into the sky and effortlessly, beautifully . . . flew. She listened, she saw, she talked to the wind, and she came down when she was supposed to.

“That was the turning point. The air hasn’t tried to kill me since that day. I had a great flight without instruments for fifty miles. It was just beautiful. And when the air got rough—because something in me understood, because I was listening, I didn’t have to be afraid.”

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the sky. Many, like Jill, have watched a fellow flyer get an extra ten feet on them, then go up four thousand feet on a thermal and fly forty miles before sunset—all because he *saw* something, some subtle pattern in the air that nobody else was seeing. At a site in India once, Jill herself *saw* “that this sheer line was about to set up along a ridge, if I flew into this area where no one would ever want to fly.” She went for it, and she soared high, sailing for hours over miles and miles of landscape. It happened because, refusing to be distracted by mere seeing, Jill really *saw*. In fact, when flying, Jill never looks directly where she’s going, she told me, but always aslant, lest what she sees with her eye interfere with what she *sees* with her intuition.

As the wind said to her one day, “Fly without instruments . . .”

THAT MORNING five years ago, after the harrowing tree landing and a night of dreams, Jill left her Spanish hos-

Some time afterward, Jill found herself sinking out over a field where, as sometimes happens, children were running, laughing, pointing at the woman falling out of the sky. Flyers like to collect the kids into one place by heading that way, and then, for safety’s sake, turn and land somewhere else. But Jill was landing sooner than she had wanted to, and was about to have her accustomed tantrum, “and I saw this kid, and I thought, okay, what’s really going on here? Maybe what’s going on with this kid is more important than my temper tantrum. His mother tried to hold him back—don’t touch this, don’t touch that. So I gave him full permission. I said, you know, if you touch everything, you’re just like every kid on the face of the planet. Just do whatever you need to do.

“And he said, ‘Can I ask you a question?’

“And I said, ‘I’ve got nowhere to be. You can ask me all the questions you want.’” ▼