

FALL

Every trajectory has its apogee: that moment of weightless transcendence in which you marvel at the heights to which you have soared. There you hang, motionless, frozen for one perfect instant in the utter stillness between rise and fall, somewhere between the earth and the stars. You turn silently in light and shadow. Awestruck.

And then you are falling.

The success in Sacramento masked deep problems.

First, our health was rapidly deteriorating. Exhaustion, anxiety, and insomnia haunted me now. I prided myself on my ability to shoulder superhuman workloads, but I was badly burned out. Although I was still on track to finish my PhD program in the allotted three years, I could no longer give the nonprofit the lion's share of my time and energy.

Second, we found no support among key organizations and people whose help we desperately needed. I naively hoped for Air Force support and sought it every way I knew how. Although Air Force leadership applauded my work, that never translated into action. I briefed the project widely but only one general ever bothered to contact me. I replied with eight specific ways he could help. He never wrote back.

I earnestly needed support from SAASS because the school

oversaw my PhD and my career trajectory. SAASS faculty cherished their mission of educating strategists who creatively applied airpower to achieve U.S. national interests. They taught airpower theory, strategy, international relations, and military innovation. We read case studies of disruptive military officers who took great risks and challenged conventional thinking to lead some of the greatest military transformations of the 20th century. I saw myself as living out everything SAASS had educated me to do.

Key leaders at SAASS had only one concern: that I stop pursuing frivolous distractions and focus on my PhD. Our correspondence grew tense and then adversarial.

To keep going, I needed one resource more than anything else: my own time. With the help of friends working in Air Force Headquarters, I made an unconventional ask to extend my time at Stanford, which would give me the breathing room to continue Uplift while still completing my PhD. Key stakeholders in Air Force Headquarters supported the ask, especially after the briefing to the Chief of Staff, but a SAASS administrator killed it.

Brandon was also in a precarious place with his advisor. His overcommitment to the project meant that he would now need an additional year to graduate. I felt terrible about putting him in this position.

We needed to slow down but we were trapped.

Momentum had taken over.

Our nonprofit was broke, but Brian had finished our fundraising video and the BBC story would air in a month. That media wave would be our one and only chance to fundraise and prepare for a summer demo in Turkey. If we slowed down, the organization would die.

We kept at it.

While we waited for the BBC story to go live, we fundraised across our network. It did not go well. The CEO of a drone

company pledged help, then backed off after talking to his lawyers. Prominent philanthropists expressed vague admiration but offered no support. When we sent out our first newsletter, several nonprofit leaders promptly unsubscribed. We were baffled and demoralized.

I found no meaningful support at Stanford. For all the talk about world-changing social innovation, money made Silicon Valley go round. Nobody could understand why we hadn't organized Uplift as a for-profit company. Two student groups at the Stanford Graduate School of Business developed business plans to turn Uplift into a sustainable corporation. Both ditched the mission of breaking sieges in Syria. There was no profit in serving destitute populations in war zones.

Someone suggested crowdfunding. That idea intimidated me. Crowdfunding depended on donor rewards, but we could not guarantee success. My teammates argued that our donors would understand that.

It still seemed terribly risky.

Experienced leaders tell you, "It's lonely at the top." This was definitely true during this season. I believed we were moving too fast, but I also knew my weaknesses: I avoid risks in the absence of information, rarely ask for help, and am terrible at marketing. I loathed Silicon Valley hustlers who raised millions selling pipe dreams. My style was to underpromise and overdeliver. Like many artists, I preferred to stay quiet, head down, laser-focused on craftsmanship and quality. If we did that, I thought, support would come.

That approach clearly had not worked.

The team was right; we needed to ask for help.

I agonized over the decision.

During this season I read Peter Diamandis' book *Bold*, which

urges audacity at critical moments like these. Many failed entrepreneurs give up at precisely the moment they should double down.

Crowdfunding offered our best shot at reaching Turkey. So we were bold.

The team ran an amazing campaign. Our webpage told an extraordinary story. Brian's fundraising video and the BBC clip beautifully showcased our vision, capabilities, and needs.⁷ We tried to excite potential donors while honestly communicating the risks and uncertainty.

We reached out to everyone we knew: Air Force leadership, State Department officials, advisors to UN Ambassador Samantha Power. One team member met Stefan de Mistura, the UN Special Representative for Syria. We spoke at humanitarian conferences in Cyprus and at MIT. We pitched to Peter Diamandis' Singularity University.

Donations arrived but we noted an alarming trend: support mostly came from family and friends. Despite the publicity wave, few outside donations poured in. The big aid organizations barely stirred. Neither did Syrians. BBC botched the Arabic version of the story, which conflated my military service with the Syria Airlift Project in a way that prompted an outcry about American imperialism.

The night before the crowdfunding campaign ended, we still needed \$4,000 to reach our \$40,000 goal. The crowdfunding site used an all-or-nothing model and would refund all donations unless we closed that gap by midnight. At the last minute, a relative donated \$5,000. He called to say that he found our work inspiring at a time when so much about American politics left him depressed and cynical. His faith and generosity humbled me, but I felt sick with fear. I worried his faith was misplaced.

Even as the campaign was underway, I worked around the clock on approvals and logistics to recreate our Sacramento demo in Turkey. We only had a few months to prepare.

Turkey looked less and less viable. ISIS—later the Islamic State—had rampaged across Syria over the previous year, changing everything. International will to support the Syrian opposition evaporated. ISIS spread into Turkey, creating severe danger along the border. The last thing Turkey needed was a crazy fly-by-night humanitarian venture creating new risks on its soil.

Our options narrowed week by week. Our appeals to the Turkish government hit dead ends. U.S. officials expressed admiration for our work but saw no way forward.

We were raising funds for an operation that looked less and less viable. I could barely function because of the stress. I delegated almost every aspect of the crowdfunding campaign because even looking at the page made me physically ill.

I kept chanting Diamandis' mantra: Be bold. Be bold. Be bold.

We had always insisted that our planes must launch from a neighboring country like Turkey or Jordan, subject to third-party monitoring. It was the safest way to ensure that Syrians embroiled in a losing war would not repurpose our planes as weapons.

With Turkey off the table, our Syrian friends and advisors urged us to reconsider. If we could just ship the planes to Turkey or Jordan, they could transport the planes to trusted agents inside Syria and launch from there.

A viable plan came together. A friend ran a nonprofit in Jordan that taught Syrian refugees to design and build custom prosthetics. He helped us draft a proposal to stand up a drone program at his makerspace. If we offered drone training to Jordanian students, the Jordanian government—always looking to grow its private sector—

might support us. Once that operation was up and running, we could also train teams who would enter Syria. A former British diplomat helped us pitch the proposal to the Jordanian government.

A crisis erupted in our team when I announced this possibility. We were reversing a well-reasoned decision, some team members said. They worried about the higher risk of weaponization. And because U.S. and Australian sanctions law prohibited the export of drones to Syria, we could be found guilty of breaking the law. We planned to seek exemptions to sanctions law, but even so, several team members resigned.

Around this time a feud erupted between two of the Syrian organizations I relied on. Even as an Arabic-speaking Middle East specialist, Syria was largely opaque to me; anything we did inside the country required putting extraordinary faith in local partners. I had no idea which organization to trust.

Summer drew closer.

Another option emerged. A month after our Refugee Empowerment Event, a terrible earthquake in Nepal drew attention to the humanitarian potential of drones. I invited Stanford's Nepali students to fly with us one day. They still had friends and family in Nepal, and I wanted to hear whether they thought these drones would add value. We had a wonderful time, and the flights went perfectly. The students saw tremendous potential for delivering water filtration systems to remote areas.

A Nepali nonprofit wanted to stand up a humanitarian drone lab in Kathmandu, and a large philanthropic organization offered Uplift a \$40,000 grant to support the effort. Executing a Nepal project would detour us away from Syria, but would demonstrate our capabilities and give us practice deploying in an operational environment.

I dragged my feet on a decision.

So many variables were in play now. We continued to explore last options for Turkey, still waited on answers from Jordan, and still tried to make sense of the Syria option.

We had so little time.

As the spring quarter wound down, I discovered that I had made a catastrophic mistake. For the entire past year we had built towards a summer deployment to Turkey, so I had assumed that much of our team would be available.

I was wrong. Nearly our entire engineering team departed campus for the summer. Those who remained had a combination of vacations, research obligations, and internships. Not a single engineer would be available to travel to Jordan or Nepal in August. The consequences of having an all-volunteer team became increasingly apparent.

June arrived. We sat on \$40,000 of crowdfunded donations. Friends and supporters asked about our progress. I had no idea how to keep faith with our donors.

My sense of personal failure was constant and inescapable now. I lived in perpetual exhaustion, and the simple act of checking my email hurled me into an emotional abyss. No amount of rest and recuperation could remove the weight of responsibility from my shoulders. I saw no relief on the horizon. I had never felt so hopeless.

My family felt the strain. We limited our summer vacations because I needed to be available to travel to Jordan or Nepal, possibly alone.

My health suffered. On my 35th birthday I felt a terrible rip in my lower back while water skiing. I could barely move for two weeks. My mental health plummeted. I had always been even-

keeled, but could barely manage my erratic emotions now.

A deeper and more personal battle had also been unfolding. I grew up as a devout evangelical Christian, but doubts had always tormented me, and my faith had steadily unraveled over the past fifteen years. Now, with so little left, I finally acknowledged that I could no longer identify as a Christian. The grief, pain, and loss were unlike anything I had ever experienced. I had no idea who I was anymore. My gradual “coming out” devastated my family and friends. I had become a source of pain and grief to everyone I loved.

I was failing at the helm of Uplift, failing to be a good Christian and husband and father, failing to thrive as a graduate student, and failing to live up to the expectations of my faculty at SAASS and Stanford. I had burned so many bridges to follow my heart’s call, and now everything was coming apart.

Still, I did not give up.

I flew at Lake Lagunita several times a week. I fought to keep my optimism, fought to motivate our remaining volunteers, fought to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

On July 3, 2015 we trekked out to Lake Lagunita for yet another day of battling Resistance. We launched Waliid, burdened with an unusually heavy payload. We pushed the limits, trying to obtain the payloads and ranges we would need in Syria.

The plane tilted right, plunged, and struck the ground.

We saw fire.

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

MARK D. JACOBSEN



CONTINUAL ASCENT

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