

The Pole

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I've often been asked the question: "If you could go back and change something in your life, what would it be?" Usually my answer includes general statements about taking more chances and making more friends. But there is one thing I know for certain that would do if I had the opportunity again. I would go down the pole.

When I was in elementary school we had a Big Toy at one end of the yard. During recess there were many options for playing. We could hide in one of the large tires, go on the swings, go down the slide, hang from an oversized steel arachnid (known as the "spider toy") and play games with a red ball.

During fourth and fifth grades I usually gravitated to the Big Toy. It had a wooden ladder with silver rungs leading up to a thin wooden bridge. Once we made it across the bridge we could stand on a platform. There was a space underneath the platform that we usually referred to as "the jail." It was a popular place to go when the Big Toy sometimes became a pirate ship.

Off to the side of all of this was the pole. It curved at the top and then went straight down. Other kids reached out to it and then flung themselves from the platform, circling down to the ground. Not me. For six years I watched everyone else reach out and let themselves go. I'd sit on one of the tires and watch. Sometimes I'd even stand around on the platform and shake my head whenever anyone gestured for me to try it.

I got close once. With only two other people standing on the platform with me, I was able to slide my nervous, shaky hands around the metal. I pulled them back to wipe the sweat off onto my pants, and it was then that I lost my nerve. I reached out again, but the closest I ever came to sliding down was when someone bumped into me. I screamed and backed away, hanging onto the Big Toy for dear life.

I was scared. I was terrified at the thought of letting my feet leave something solid for even a couple of seconds. I worried that I would fall and land on my face, that the other kids would find one more reason to laugh at me. No amount of

coaxing or cajoling would get me down that pole. It became a goal of mine to overcome that fear, to let myself have that experience before I went on to middle school.

It didn't happen. One day I left the elementary school yard and didn't look back. Three months later I started taking a bus to my new school. The bus stop was at a corner next to the elementary school, and every day I had to walk past the Big Toy. It loomed on top of the slight incline with the pole gleaming in the morning or afternoon sun, reminding me that I had never reached my goal. Every afternoon I'd see kids playing on the Big Toy, and sometimes I was tempted to join them. They'd fly down the pole, and I'd wonder once again what had stopped me from doing the same thing.

Years went by. I left middle school and went on to high school. While I made friends, I always found one thing to be difficult. I could never let myself place my complete trust in people. I couldn't reach out and have faith that other people would help me and be there for me. Doing trust exercises at a retreat during ninth grade, I had to fall backwards into the arms of a friend of mine. I couldn't make myself go. I found it hard to give up my grasp on anything that I could control. And every time I set a goal for myself that I didn't quite reach, I always thought about how I should've gone down the pole.

It was during the summer after I graduated when I was getting ready to go to college that I looked at the elementary school yard. Since we only lived a block and a half away from the school, I decided to go up and wander around. As I climbed over the low fence, I realized that this was it. I was finally going to go down the pole. It was time for me to overcome that fear and learn that I could let go of things.

I stopped when I was about halfway across the yard. The old Big Toy was gone. It had been replaced with a newer version, one with less wood, more colored plastic...and no pole. I stared at it for a long time, not able to believe what I was seeing. My opportunity was lost. I would never get the chance to slide down the pole, to feel my body swing freely through the air and make a gentle landing on the gravel. Despite all my reflections about it, I had never realized how much going down that pole would have meant to me until I completely lost the chance.

I still wonder sometimes how many of the injuries to my self-esteem and my soul could have been avoided if I had just done that one thing, if I had just taken that one chance. I avoided going down the pole for all the wrong reasons. I could maybe accept it if I had been worried about being physically hurt, but I was more afraid of the emotional pain. What more would I have been able to do? How many more times could I have been vocal about what I really wanted or taken a stand for something I really believed in? I will always wonder what it would have felt like to have had this one goal, so close to being reached, actually fulfilled by my own doing. I think it would have been the sweetest feeling in the world.