

STOP FLAPPING AND RIDE YOUR THERMALS

BY DEWITT JONES

STEP OUT, CATCH THE UPDRAFT, THEN SOAR.



Staggering day, any way you look at it.

And what a way to look at it: standing on the north side of Molokai, Hawaii, atop the world's highest sea cliffs, gazing across the azure Pacific, feeling so alive I can hardly contain myself.

The unkempt grass of the pasture marches on a few feet beyond where my own are planted. The grass quivers there at the cliff edge, blown by stiff winds from below. I take a step closer. The edge seems to pull me. I can feel its intensity. Trembling, I take another step...

Whoa! From out of nowhere an apparition. So startling, I almost stumble backward. Wait, it's not an apparition; it's real. A frigate bird, its huge black wings, motionless, rising like a Harrier jet straight up from below the cliff edge, levitating into my consciousness. For one breathless moment the bird's gaze meets my own. Then the wind sweeps him higher. Another bird takes his place, then another, and another, until seven have soared past me. All in silence. All without a beat of their wings. All without effort, rising on the invisible turbulence beneath them.



Higher and higher they soar on that indiscernible funnel of air. Did I say indiscernible? Not for them. I watch the subtle movements of their wings.

Never a full stroke, simply tiny adjustments to bring them back to the place of maximum lift. Higher and higher...without struggle.



A PROFOUND LESSON FROM NATURE

Finally they are just sable pecks among the clouds. Then, as if to some inaudible command, they trim their wings, break their upward spiral, and set a course for the Hawaiian island of Oahu, some 30 miles distant. It's clear they'll make it without a single wing beat.

I'm thunderstruck. I fall into the grass with a force that reminds me only too clearly that I do not have wings. I sit staring into the sky where the birds have been. It was too powerful not to have meaning. Slowly words coalesce in my head, words that make me smile. "Quit flapping, Dewitt. Quit flapping and ride your thermals!"

Oh, how true! Quit flapping and ride my thermals! But, how do I do it?

First, I'd have to trust there are thermals — hidden currents of air, paths of lift which make everything effortless. I have felt them. Haven't you? Those times in life when the way is clear and the vision sharp. When the whole universe seems to buoy and support you, and all you have to do is spread your wings. Yes, occasionally I have experienced a thermal. But I never knew where they came from or, when they disappeared, where they had gone.

MOVE TO THE EDGE

Here was Nature not only confirming that thermals existed, but showing me where to find them — on the edge.

The edge: In yoga it's defined as the point of intensity before pain. The point of maximum aliveness and attention. Indeed, the edge is the central issue of this discipline, simply to stay there with consciousness and compassion — and to follow, wherever it leads.

FIND YOUR "THERMALS"

The frigate birds knew. They came to the edge of the island because they knew that's where their thermals waited. They knew the lift would be there to sweep them into the clouds. They found their thermals and they followed, paying attention to the feedback the air was giving them.

Dip a wing here, curl a feather there, no flapping, just tiny adjustments to stay in the flow, in the thermal — higher and higher.

Knowing that thermals are there, perhaps I, too, can come to my own edge and look for them. Not to sit in security and boredom too far back from that edge, nor to cringe in pain too far over it, but to stand fearlessly — right on the edge. Then to stop flapping long enough to be able to find a thermal.

And then to trust. Trust deeply enough to step out and catch the updraft, to ride it with complete cognizance, making those subtle adjustments which keep me in the flow. No flapping, just...soaring.

The frigate birds are gone now. The sea is quiet, the clouds hang motionless. The only movement is the grass at the brink, dancing in the breeze from below.

The edge beckons.

I don't know about you — but I'm going.

