



## *The Meaning of Fear*

*Fear is a force that is always ready to make its move for domination over a personality or a society. It can only be controlled when it is understood. Here, an examination of this powerful emotion in some of its many facets — not the least as an ally of man . . .*

□ Perhaps the most telling observation ever made about fear is that it always relates to the future. You cannot be afraid of the immediate present; you cannot be afraid of the past. Neither can you be afraid of a thing, a person or a situation; you can only be frightened of what that thing or person might do, or of what might happen. You may fear that something has already happened, but this too relates to the future because what you really fear is your own discovery that the dreaded event has occurred.

For fear, by definition, is an emotion caused by impending danger or evil. Therefore it can only be validated when events are beyond the control of those it occupies. Since few matters in the ordinary course of life are totally beyond one's control, fear is a prerequisite to our well-being and even survival. One is afraid of what might happen; one takes action to prevent it from happening or to mitigate the consequences; more often than not, the pre-emptive action has the desired effect.

This can be seen best in the world of nature, in which fear, though it may go by different names, is general. A hare will flee from an attacking lynx; a bear will shrink back shuddering from the approach of a forest fire. No matter how mighty, every creature possesses the instinct to recoil from danger. There must be times when lions cringe; otherwise lions would be extinct.

The driver who wheels out of the path of a near-collision, the housewife who grabs a child about to tumble down the stairs — each experiences fear in

this same essence. Fear is nature's great alarm system, enabling all the creatures of the earth to obviate harm.

But among human beings there is always a danger that fear will cease to function as a useful servant and become the master. It can take control of a personality. It can gain dominance over whole nations. It has the potential to rule the world.

Franklin D. Roosevelt showed a keen understanding of the limitless power of fear when, with the economy of the United States seemingly tumbling down on the heads of bewildered Americans, he told them that all they had to fear was fear itself. The "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror" of which he spoke makes a good example of the conversion of fear from a beneficial instinct into a menace in its own right.

When the Great Depression first broke out, people reacted with panic. This is a natural manifestation of fear, often seen in the animal world. But instead of recovering from their initial panic, as an animal will do, and then taking action to deal with the danger before them, people slid into the hopeless inertia which is a mark of cowardice. Cowardice is a uniquely human characteristic born of another such characteristic, imagination. When the imagination takes a positive track, man is full of strength and courage. When it turns negative, he becomes a helpless slave of fear.

"It knows no master but one. His name is understanding." Thus an essay in the *Duluth Bulletin* identifies a vital feature of the nature of fear.

When medical researchers set out to work on a cure for a disease, they first compile everything that is known about the disease in all its aspects. So it is with fear; only through an understanding of its origins, its symptoms, and its effects, may it be overcome.

"Fear always springs from ignorance," Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote. That may be an oversimplification, but it nonetheless helps to point the way to an understanding of fear. It is usually the product of incomplete knowledge or incomplete thinking. Consider the fears one develops at the outset of life.

"Mommy, I'm afraid of the dark. Please leave the light on." Early childhood brings a succession of misinformed, unfounded fears. Yet a fear is a fear, whether it has its foundation in the mind or in external reality. Parents should treat childhood fears seriously, gently and gradually attempting to put them to rest.

The very baselessness of childhood fears offers parents an opportunity to teach their children a lesson that will last all their lives: that most fears exist only in the imagination. It can be better demonstrated to a child than to a person of any other age that, in the childlike words of Rudyard Kipling, "Of all the liars in the world, sometimes the worst are your own fears."

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### *Parents should watch out for developing phobias*

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It should be borne in mind in bringing up children that, like a disease, fear is contagious. In her excellent work on the subject, *Understanding Fear*, Bonaro Overstreet explains: ". . . Fear is not a private affair because the person deeply infected by it will infect others, the most common infection being that from parent to child."

Fearful adults, then, are capable of unconsciously nurturing fears in their offspring that may never be overcome. Without meaning to do so, the parents may encourage normal childhood fears to the degree where debilitating phobias result.

Dozens of phobias are common among children. Parents should be aware of what devastating force they can have. The ultimate danger is that the child — and later the adult — will withdraw into a social isolation in which fresh fears will breed, setting off a cycle of misery. In extreme cases phobia sufferers conceive a general fear of life, afraid even to set foot outside of their own homes, yet dying a thousand deaths.

Few persons of any age are entirely without potential phobias. Some may avoid heights, some get a case of "the jitters" when alone in an empty house, some feel an aversion to dogs. Most of us control those feelings with our intellects, which tell us that they are illogical. Many other unfortunately, however, are unable to keep a rein on their fears, though they may know full well how unreasonable these fears really are.

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### *Fear will masquerade in many different guises*

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People can harbour some very strange phobias, such as fear of wool and fear of Friday. To those who have them, these fears are vividly real. Two points should be made about phobias: first that people are able to live with them, and second that they are not incurable. A Canadian airline once ran a course for people who were terrified of flying, gradually allaying their fears by psychological means until they were ready to take a specially organized conditioning flight. The majority of those who took the course are able to fly quite comfortably today.

Phobias have at least one merit in that they focus a person's fears. Those who have them know exactly what they are afraid of. Most of us are subject to a more insidious kind of fear which often is not identified. We may not even know that we have it, but it is there.

It masquerades in many guises, among them shyness, anxiety, caution, conformity, false cynicism, and indolence. In these forms fear blights hope, kills ambition, stalls progress and ruins personal relationships. It is, to borrow a phrase from the title of Cyril Connolly's book, an "enemy of promise". It swallows lives.

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Among the most pervasive of the elusive fears that insinuate themselves into people's minds in western society today is fear of failure. It makes its bid for control of a person early in life, perhaps in a grade one classroom or on a Little League baseball field. As it progresses it appears in a variety of subsidiary forms: fear of making mistakes, fear of breaking with convention, fear of one's occupational superiors, fear of dismissal from a job, and finally fear of trying. In the latter form it can destroy the spirit of an individual — and without spirit, what is life?

Psychologists have established that fear of failure is frequently a product of misleading personal comparisons. One of the most disheartening habits a person can have is to measure oneself against successful people who have become that way through investing years of effort in mastering their particular field. Their success is usually the result of trial and error — of not making mistakes now because they have made them before and have learned from them. They have not been afraid to fail, and they have not let their failures stop their progress. In short, they have braved fear of failure, and in so doing have broken through to the road to success.

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### *Pitting the power of reason against the power of fear*

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The principal effect of any kind of fear is immobilization. Soldiers gripped by terror on the battlefield will "freeze", and thus increase their chances of getting shot. Fear of failure in particular has a way of immobilizing its victim; then, like some voracious tapeworm, it proceeds to feed itself on failure and more failure. Ultimately, it weakens its host to the point of abject despair.

The remedy for this is what that assiduous student of fear, Ernest Hemingway, once called "intelligent courage". Courage is a quality that is widely misunderstood. It is not an absence or lack of fear, but a reaction to it. In the world of nature, the courage shown by animals in a life-and-death crisis is instinctive. Man has this instinct too; in addition he may bring to it the high intelligence with which his species has been endowed.

The human power of reason not only reinforces courage, but helps us find our innate courage at times when we may feel it has deserted us. In the case of fear of failure, reason tells us that this fear itself will result in failure, because one must always risk failure in order to achieve success.

The power of reason is humanity's most potent weapon against the power of fear in general. And in these times we need to match our power of reason against our fears on a general human scale. Historians may well look back on this as the age of the terrorist — an age in which the use of fear as a device to gain political ends has been refined to a high art.

The assaults of the terrorists call upon people everywhere to "keep their heads" so as to show that intimidation cannot succeed in making the majority accede to the demands of a ruthless minority. The historical stakes are high, for our reason must tell us that the more public opinion gives in to terrorism, the more terrorism there will be. Through this process our lives could become ruled by the sub machine-gun and the hidden bomb.

On a more subtle level, it will also take a reasoned resistance to fear to ensure that the progress of mankind does not give way to a state of timorous inertia. Fear is spreading about the deleterious side-effects of economic growth. The natural, courageous reaction to this would be to establish what there is to be feared in the expansion of technology and the exploitation of resources, and then to tackle these identifiable problems.

This would allow the benefits of economic growth to spread to more and more of the people of the earth. The cowardly reaction would be to permit fear to exert its paralyzing grip on our will to press on with the advance of the human species. The only possible outcome would be self-defeat.

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### *It cannot stand up to constructive action*

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Mass fear has been responsible for some of the ghastliest chapters in history. As in the case of individuals, the existence of fear among large bodies of people may result in aggression — a desperate striking out at the object of fear. Mutual fear among nations has frequently resulted in war.

In the wrong political hands — hands like those of Torquemada of the Spanish Inquisition — mass fear has become the tool of persecution and tyranny. We see it all around in the world today; one racial or political group fears another; so the fearful group attempts to persecute or even to destroy the group it fears.

If fear, whether individual or collective, usually gives rise to negative and self-destructive responses, the obverse is true: it cannot stand up to constructive action. The great Canadian physician Sir William Osler worked out a psychological plan for concentrating action into what he termed "day-tight compartments", like the water-tight compartments of ships. "Each of you is a much more marvellous organization than an ocean liner, and you are bound on a longer voyage," he once told a group of students at Yale University. "By touching a button at every level of your life you can close the iron doors shutting out the past — the dead yesterdays. Touch another and shut out the future — the unborn tomorrows. Then you are safe — safe for today."

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### *Ask yourself just what you have to be afraid of*

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Remembering that fear always relates to the future, this would seem like good advice in combatting it. But it is obvious that, to be safe day-by-day, we must take some precautions to ensure our safety in the future. What about preparing for tomorrow? Osler's answer was that, if we throw all of our energy, intelligence and enthusiasm into doing superb work today, there will be nothing to fear tomorrow — in other words that present action generates future security.

Constructive activity at the peak of one's abilities necessarily is a defence against fear. Activity demands decisiveness; decisiveness is an adjunct of confidence; confidence is an ingredient of courage, which is the handler of fear.

But activity in itself may not be enough to dispel fear once it has become rooted. Here contemplation comes into play. Once in a while each of us should

take a quiet, solitary hour or two to ask ourselves: Just what do I have to be afraid of? We should take an inventory of our fears, with special emphasis on those which may live in us under a different guise.

This done, we should ask ourselves which of these fears are imaginary and which are real. Which are of the human, manufactured kind, and which are the healthy alarm signals that permeate all of nature? How many of them can be handled with the instinctive courage of nature, combined with the immeasurable advantage of human intelligence? Which cannot be dealt with by constructive action, taken without delay?

You may find that, as a result of this exercise, at least some of your fears will have evaporated before your eyes. Others will have been dissipated by your resolution to take action, provided the action is taken immediately. Procrastination helps to strengthen and breed fears.

It is worth speculating that, if people collectively were to recognize the fears of society and examine them in this way, the result would be the same. Some of the fears of the future would prove to be illusory, and some legitimate; and action could be taken to invalidate those legitimate fears.

There is no possibility that people will ever be entirely without fear, nor would they want to be. Without its instinctive warning bells, they would be powerless to cope with danger.

Fear, then, is an ally of man — but at best an untrustworthy ally. It is devious and ambitious, ever alert for a chance to take us over. It bears close watching if it is to be kept in its proper, serviceable place.

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