

3. FEAR: CHALLENGE TO ADULTHOOD I

The certainty that nothing can happen to us that does not in our innermost being belong to us is the foundation of fearlessness.

—Govinda

Definitions

Fear is the feeling that arises in response to present danger. It is a No to what seems unabsorbable. Like all feelings, fear is based on a subjective belief that a certain stimulus poses a threat.

Appropriate fear leads to a flight or fight response which is activated and dealt with, and is followed by repose. This fear is necessary since it signals a danger we need to avoid or eliminate.

Neurotic fear engages the flight/fight pattern but never follows through on it. This can be simply good sense for smooth living in society or it can be a personal block and thus self-limiting.

Neurotic fear shows us what we have failed to integrate. For example, fear of the water vanishes by learning to swim. Swimming is, in effect, how water (subjective threat) is integrated. We have adapted to a former danger, befriended it, and become comfortable with it through skill and knowledge. We now approach the water with consciousness and competence, the components that signal integration. Moreover, we feel the excitement of the water and all the fun it offers. Less fear has led to more contact with our own liveliness.

Fear is the opposite of love because it is totally conditional. It keeps us out of the water; it excludes. Love is all-inclusive. To say that "love casts out fear" is to say that unconditional and conscious integration has triumphed over ignorance and inhibition.

Actually, every problem is something we are having trouble integrating. This tells us that fear is somewhere at the bottom of every obstacle we face. Locating the fear element helps us work through it with more consciousness.

Negative Excitement

Neurotic fear is unintegrated excitement. The energy in fear is simply blocked excitement that can be released by wholehearted, active engagement with the realities that threaten us. How this can be done is the final subject of this chapter.

Negative excitement is a stressful form of pain in which we fear and desire the same object at the same time. It is an addictive energy that usually stems from old emotional business that has been activated by the dramatic complications in our life story.

Negative excitement can keep us stuck for years in dysfunctional, abusive, or self-defeating circumstances. It sometimes feels like a sense of purpose since it sustains our ongoing drama. When the object of our negative excitement is gone, we may then feel depressed and even believe our life has lost meaning.

The best way to handle negative excitement is to treat it as an addiction and work a twelve step program of recovery, e.g. Co-dependents Anonymous.

Rationalization

Every fear and addiction is upheld and maintained by rationalizations, reasons used to prevent change. "I am afraid to reach out because I might be rejected." This fear has no *real* object, only a possible one, but the given reason (rationalization) maintains a stalemate and the person remains afraid.

Here are three ways in which rationalizations maintain fear:

1. The "reason" is meant to keep us in control by protecting us from surprises. This control backfires by vitiating our own resilience, a prerequisite for the integration of fear.

2. The "reason" blockades access to adult solutions. We are so attached to a long-held belief that we lose perspective and mobility for change.

3. The "reason" directly maintains the inertia of fear since we go on fearing what we refuse to confront.

The irony in all three of these is that what is meant to protect us from fear only protects the fear itself. Rationalization is the sentry that guards not us but the fear in us!

Fear of Other People

What is happening when certain people scare us?

1. We may be afraid of the uncontrollable feelings that a certain person evokes in us. *If you fear someone you can trust with your feelings, admit your fear and its basis to him directly. "I'm afraid that you won't approve of me and that I will feel hurt when I'm rejected." You may paradoxically lighten the process by exaggerating: "I'm afraid that if you reject me, I'll die!"*

Making these admissions aloud every time you feel the fear shows its humorous dimension and its highly subjective origin. Gradually, the fear steps back in embarrassment!

If you fear someone you cannot trust, change your situation by leaving it or handling the fear within your own support system (friends, therapy, etc.) It takes courage to admit your limits and not damage yourself by staying in no-win stress and pain. Endurance of such humiliation erodes self-esteem and keeps you afraid.

2. The other person may be afraid and we are picking up on the fear she is projecting. She may, for instance, fear closeness and use an intimidating manner to safeguard distance. *If you suspect that someone fears you but is not admitting it, dispel the secrecy by asking directly about the fear. "Are you afraid I might get too close? I do not*

want to do that. Let's talk about the amount of closeness you want to receive and the amount I want to give."

3. Specific people, through unconscious or conscious clues, elicit old parental or childhood terrors. This is especially true when we seem helpless or when we feel too afraid even to defend ourselves. *Explore your fears to find their origin. If they are kindled by your early life, do the griefwork that can heal the scared child within as described in Chapter 1.*

4. Some people reflect back to us our own Shadow side. We configure others to be "greater than" us, positively by awe, and negatively by dread. Actually, we are fearing the admirable or despicable qualities unintegrated in ourselves. *If they are Shadow fears, use the guidelines in Chapter 10 to work with them. Then you take responsibility for your fears, and this gesture can lead to a breakthrough for you.*

Working on Neurotic Fears

Admit your fear to yourself, to the person involved and/or to any person you trust. Admitting cuts through denial and attends to reality. This attention releases the healing and power that we have refused to claim or employ.

Allow the feeling of fear fully with no attempt to suppress it or to be free of it.

Acting because of fear is cowardice; **acting with** fear is the courage that survives it.

Techniques helpful in the process of "acting as if" are:

- a) Take deep breaths from the diaphragm (since anxious breathing is thoracic).
- b) Focus on an image that increases serenity.
- c) Ask for support from a friend or ask for inner support by imaging a strong person who accompanies you as a guide or coach.

Results

The "triple A approach" in working through fear is an unconditional engagement with what is. We are reversing our No to what seemed unabsorbable to a Yes to what is integratable.

We thus make contact with our own liveliness, the positive excitement which had been blocked by fear. The energy that went into elaborate fictions, defenses, and rationalizations is reinvested in personal power and freedom from fear. "I am powerless in the face of this fear" changes to "I found a choice where I thought there was only a dead end."

The demon power of fear is, after all, exactly this apparent choicelessness. Acting *with* fear, i.e. including it, locates and affirms an alternative. The spell is thus broken by what cast the spell! The key was in the lock all the time! Nothing has to go on scaring us. Every human experience is assimilable. This is a foundation of optimism.

Integration is the primary result of working on fear. Chapter 9 provides a detailed explanation of this process. Once a fear is worked through, it releases its liveliness and makes us happier. Notice the paradox of human unfolding: every fear blocks a capacity; every integration of fear reveals and accesses a capacity.

Fear	Integration
Loss	Letting go of attachment
Change	Adjustment
Self-revelation	Self-acceptance
Loneliness	Support system
Intimacy	Commitment
Power	Assertiveness
Feelings	Acceptance of vulnerability

The Void	Staying with it
Failure	Letting the chips fall where they may
Success	Self-esteem

When this ultimate crisis comes . . . when there is no way out—that is the very moment when we explode from within and the totally other emerges: the sudden surfacing of a strength, a security of unknown origin, welling up from beyond reason, rational expectation, and hope.

—Emil Durkheim