

Fear (1 of 5) Stories and Fear

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Continuing with the topic of emotions, I'd like to talk about fear. Two years ago, I think I gave a short four-part series on fear. This week, I thought of talking about fear in not so common ways. Hopefully, you will get some new perspectives that are supportive and helpful.

One of the things that I hope this week will bring is the gift of fear, that fear has benefits. A deeper consideration of what fear is and our relationship to it is invaluable, something we can appreciate that we've done.

Following up on last week's discussion about stories, one thing I'd like to suggest that you consider is two things about the relationship between stories and fear. The first, and maybe more fundamental, is what is the story you have about fear itself? What is the attitude you have? What is the relationship you have to fear? Without parsing all the different kinds of fear there might be, do you have a gut response to fear?

Are you someone who tends to be aversive to fear? Do you pull away, don't pay attention, or shut down? Do you escape? Do you freeze? Are you a person who tends to be counter-phobic towards fear – you move toward what you're afraid of? Do you see fear as a threat that you're now going to get angry or attack? Or are you going to have a strong aversion to fear as opposed to being repelled by fear? What's the dynamic that happens to you around fear?

Do you have a story that fear is bad? That's a very simple story. Or a story that fear is a consequence of some personal failing – that if you were really wise and liberated, you would have no fear – “Certainly I must be doing something wrong.”

Is the story, maybe subconsciously, that fear is an authority figure? That fear has a lot of authority and strength you have to listen to. That when fear appears, it is one of the most important signals or messages you have to listen to, hide from, or react to.

What kind of policy do you have around fear when it arises? Are you more phobic of fear or counter-phobic of fear? Does the very idea of fear raise alarm and concern? Does fear create more fear?

Or is the idea of fear something that you have some level of confidence about? You don't have a lot of fear, but when fear is there, it's not a problem. It comes along, but it doesn't inhibit you. What is your relationship to fear? How does fear live for you?

I would like to say that we should have a lot of care around these questions because the range of people's fear has a lot to do with their life experiences. People have had horrific or not so horrific things happen to them, and some things touch the heart or mind in such a deep way that it leaves a legacy. It leaves traces in us. So when we even raise the word fear, there's a physical relationship to that. There's a physicality that gets triggered and evoked, maybe a physical memory of things that were dangerous or harmful in the past that still lives in us.

So there can be an embodied story, an embodied relationship to fear, not just mental ideas. How much of your relationship to fear is an embodied relationship? Where in your body is that felt? What is your relationship to fear?

One of the relationships that I've had to fear is the ostrich relationship. Sometimes when I have been afraid, I kind of put my head in the sand. I haven't really shut down, but it's like I try to pretend it's not there or I try to ignore it. Or I'm paying attention to something else, so I don't have to be with the fear. I don't do that much anymore, but that was a strategy I had at one point in my life. I wouldn't recommend it because it was not a particularly good strategy.

There were times fear inhibited me when I was younger. My relationship with fear was one of very strong identification. The fear became me. I was the fear in such a strong way that there were times when I was very young I shut down completely and kind of dissociated because of how I fully identified, lived in, and was impacted by the fear.

So fear can be huge in people's lives. I want to spend this week respecting that. At the same time, we can come into it with new perspectives that are freeing. They can show us a different way with fear.

There are stories of fear that we have and the relationship we have with them. One important thing to consider is the stories that produce fear. We can be sitting quietly by ourselves, everything is good, and then we remember a story. Or it's a fantasy about some kind of danger. It isn't just a kind of virtual reality thing that is on a screen in the mind and has nothing to do with us. But as we rehearse a frightening memory or we imagine something and tell ourselves a story, there can be an emotional response within. The body can respond. It's almost as if the stories that we tell ourselves, the images that we create in our mind, the body sometimes doesn't know the difference between what is real and what is not. Sometimes the body reacts to the stories we tell ourselves.

I've frightened myself with stories I've told. One that surprised me is a little story. When I was probably about 12 or 11, I was in the mountains in the snow. It was very foggy. I slipped and fell on a hill. I let myself slide down the hill. Then, at some point, I stopped and stood up, and I realized I had stopped a foot away from a big mountain cliff.

It wasn't until I was an adult that I somehow remembered that story. I don't remember the emotions I felt at the time. But maybe knowing more about what that meant as a young adult, I was surprised by how much fear arose in reviewing the story. The very idea of being on that cliff, my stomach got all in knots, and I got all tense.

So the ability to tell ourselves stories and have an emotional and physical response is something we should not underestimate. Probably most anxiety is a product of storytelling – imagining the future. It's projecting into the future. Most anxiety doesn't have to involve something that's immediately frightening us right now. It is anticipating something that is going to happen, something clear or maybe we are not sure about but we think it's going to be bad. This anticipatory fear, I would say, belongs to the world of stories and ideas, maybe subconscious, about some kind of danger in the future.

So stories. What are your stories that produce fear? How do those stories in you produce fear?

This is a fascinating thing to study. There might be a time when you are afraid, maybe anxious. Then be conscious of the story – the prediction, the imagination – that is operating for the fear to be there. Start looking at the relationship between the storytelling and the fear. What's the magnet? What's the hook? What is it that is touched inside? What is the story you are telling yourself that produces fear or anxiety? How does that connection between fear and the story happen? And if you can see a connection between fear and a story, say to yourself, "Oh, that's a story," and maybe look around where you are. Notice the story is not happening now. "It's a story."

What does that mean for you? What are the implications of that? What can you learn? What is the benefit of really seeing that clearly?

So, your relationship to fear, the stories you have about fear, and then the stories that produce fear. That would be fascinating, I think, for all of us to look at and spend a day with and consider. Maybe talk to a friend or a stranger about what you're learning about these stories and your relationship to fear. Please do so respectfully and carefully. Do so with a lot of respect for yourself in the process. Thank you