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Mobilizing Fear to 'Set Your Soul Free'

Gerald Walton

Abstract

In human societies, past and present, expressions of fear are widely associated with weakness and tend to be discouraged, if not shamed. Yet, fear illuminates not only danger and the need to find safety, but potential for achieving goals and meeting challenges. Fear is, then, instructive and beneficial for learning about one's identity, sense of achievement, and capacities for transformation. Through a narrative inquiry approach, this paper explores participants' perspectives on how looking at fear in ways other than weakness supports their potential for personal growth and engagement in the world.

Introduction

Do you feel scared? I do. But I won't stop and falter.

—Howard Jones, *Things can only get better* (1985)

What does it mean to consider the emotion of fear differently from the usual media-driven narratives of shame, embarrassment, and weakness? How might

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such a narrative of fear open doors by which people can reconsider the power of their own agency? What might such a narrative mean for personal transformation and enhancement of identity, both of which are foundationally connected to formal and informal education that reinforce hegemonic norms and values?

To explore these questions, I conducted a series of interviews to examine narratives of achievement and identity based on, rather than despite, fear. These narratives are not about “overcoming” fear but recognizing its utility for learning and finding purpose to enhance their lives. In the context of teaching and learning, Paulo Freire, in conversation with Ira Shor, put it this way:

[F]ear is not something that diminishes me but which makes me recognize that I am a human being. This recognition gains my attention in order to set limits when fear tells me *not* to do this or that. I have to establish limits for my fear. (Shor & Freire, 2003, p. 482; italics in original)

The focus on transformation is foundational to critical theorists who assert that education can be a practice of freedom (Freire, 1970/2006; hooks, 1994). Such a practice necessitates student-centered approaches that foster the sharing of their knowledge, in contrast with teacher-centered approaches that presume students to be incapable, on their own, of making sense of the world (Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 2007). A student-centered pedagogy means that students, in the broadest sense of the word, look within to locate their own power for transformation (Hern, 2008; Wink, 2011). Not merely another form of imposed knowledge, a critical approach begins where students are, meaning opening possibilities for them to consider their perspectives on the world and their understanding of it (Huerta-Charles, 2007; Kumashiro, 2004).

The same principle applies to contexts outside of formal education, that change in the world happens not only from *conscientization* of social and political contradictions (Freire, 1970/2006) but also increased awareness of one’s agency. The conversations I had with nine people (six women, three men) helped me to understand the ways that agency can be invoked in the context of internalized fear with the potential for self-transformation and social engagement.¹

Dimensions of fear: A broad overview

Clichés about fear abound in popular culture. One of the more prominent in North American society is Franklin D. Roosevelt’s famous dictum in 1933 from inaugural address as US president. He said that, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Taken at face value, fear is, apparently, something adversarial, dangerous, and perhaps even unpatriotic. Fear will control us if we allow it to. Perhaps fear already does. If fear is to be feared, then a logical response would be to not feel it or pretend not to.

In the context of popular culture entertainment, the narrative of disavowing fear is a sensationalized ‘hook’ for drawing viewers. In a 2018 advertisement for a

competitive cooking show called *Chopped Canada*, for example, a narrator warns: “In the *Chopped Canada* kitchen, . . .: Never let the judges see or smell your fear.” By contrast, fear is employed for entertainment value, as indicated by shows such as *Fear Factor*, which ran in the US from 2001 to 2006 and 2011 to 2012. Horror and thriller movies draw in audiences who want to experience fear, or a facsimile of it, in a controlled environment within a time-restriction (Javanbakht & Saab, 2017; Dozier, 1998). Dozier suggests, however, that because media-incited fear is pleasurable, it also can be addictive given measurable changes in the chemistry of the brain during such experiences.

Fear, then, is biological and chemical (Garpenstrand, Annas, Ekblom, Orland, & Fredrikson, 2001; Åhs, Frick, Furmark, & Fredrikson, 2015). It is also socially constructed in gendered ways. Boys and men tend to be criticized, even vilified, for showing fear or, worse, giving in to it, associating doing so with emotional weakness and conjuring up epithets rooted in sexism and homophobia (Namaste, 2006; Pascoe, 2007). Demonstrating a lack of fear is associated with masculinity (Garlinger, 1999; Hollander, 2000; Pascoe, 2007). On the other hand, women who appear to be fearless may be perceived as masculine (Halberstam, 1998; Claire & Alderson, 2013). Fear, then, is deployed in society as a regulatory instrument to enforce gender norms and expectations.

Such sexism and homophobia harken a broader point, which is that those who are targeted for violence of various kinds mirror broader anxieties among dominant groups about people whose identities become stigmatized through media and political discourses. Put another way, as particular prejudices arise for political aims, the targets of violence shift accordingly. As Robin (2004) notes, fear is a key element of modern politics that target social difference. He describes what he calls “political fear” as:

people’s felt apprehension of some harm to their collective well-being [such as] the fear of terrorism, panic over crime, anxiety about moral decay. . . . Private fears like my fear of flying or your fear of spiders are artefacts of our own psychologies and experiences, and have little impact beyond ourselves. Political fear, by contrast, arises from conflicts within and between societies. (p. 2)

Echoing Robin, Tudor (2003) argues that that a “culture of fear” pervades modern, Western society and thus fear must be examined “macroscopically,” meaning factoring in social and political contexts and ideologies (Furedi, 1997, 2005; Glassner, 2010). Narratives that incite populism for political gain are replete and are spread rapidly through social media. Consider, for example, how immigration is linked with narratives of personal danger and death. Barro (2016) reports that, in the context of the U.S., the “thrust of the Trump message on immigration is not so much that our current immigration policy fails cost-benefit analysis as it is that immigrants may kill you.”

Through narratives of exclusion and vilification, fear serves a social function

of uniting like-minded people (Roberts & Naphy, 1997) as is the case with White supremacist movements (Simi & Futrell, 2010) and their support for hardcore White nationalism. More generally, Levin and Rabrenovic (2004) outline how children learn to hate others who are not like them based on shared racist and cultural stereotypes. The U.S. President seems adept at stirring the xenophobic pot for political gain, as he did with his warning about Mexican immigrants: “They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, they’re rapists,” adding that, “They aren’t people. They’re animals.”

In addition to political gains made through dehumanization and demonization of the Other, fear is also employed as a mechanism that maintains discipline and social order (Robin, 2004; Schehr, 2005). The ideology is that punishment, or the palpable threat of it, results in strengthening and maintaining social order (Clear, 2007; Van Damme & Pauwels, 2016).

As a narrative that operates in popular culture and media (Tudor, 2003), and perhaps in deference to Roosevelt’s bid for patriotism, fear must be overcome. However, fear can also be functional in the daily routine of living, neither a character flaw nor a beacon of shame. It informs living creatures, not just humans, that danger is approaching and protection is needed (Javanbakht and Saab, 2017). Fear also serves the interests of elite athletes to maximize their performance under competition (Lingam-Willgoss, 2014; Carter, 2018; and Collins, 2018).

It is these beneficial aspects of fear that aligns with my aim to investigate the ways that participants empowered themselves by working *with* fear instead of *against* it. The purpose of the interviews was inspired by Carlos, featured in Goldstein (2006). Referring to teachers, he wrote that, “Educating is realizing that the power is not in your hands, but instead it is in your ability to guide your students to the realization that the power has been in their hands all along” (p. 216). It is the themes of agency and power that I turn to below.

Fear as relational

When I spoke with Shy-Anne,² she was a full-time graduate student and professional singer-song-writer, originally from the Matachewan First Nation. In our email and skype conversations, she talked about how she was able to recognize how fear might help her to reduce the influence of social anxiety and anorexia on her life. She describes what unfolded when she was in her first year of university and far away from her hometown:

It really triggered social anxiety of being in the city and dealing with stoplights, and people, and classrooms. So, a secretary said to me, ‘Well, if you’re looking to get over things, we’re looking for models.’ I kind of laughed at her and walked away. But then, I was kind of thinking, ‘Yeah, well, I’m scared to get up and sing in front of my peers. If I can stand naked in front of a group of people and be OK, then I can get up and sing in front of a group of people.’

She described her first experience with modeling:

My heart was pounding, I started sweating like crazy ... But, I got up there and I had my robe on and I kind of froze. The prof said, 'You don't have to do this. But nothing's going to happen other than people are just going to draw you.' When she said that, I thought, 'Well OK, yeah, they're going to be staring and they're just going to draw me.' ... I just thought, I'd sit down. How hard can it be? I just took the robe off and sat down where I was supposed to sit. My heart was pounding and I was sweating even more. I had to sit perfectly still which was hard but I just did it.

Being a model in a classroom of student artists helped her to consider her anxieties with her body in a new perspective. It also signified strength within herself to do other things, such as singing in front of public audiences. Shy-Anne characterized her experience as jumping off a cliff, not in a haphazard, careless manner, but through intentional assessment of the situation at hand. Earlier in her life, she had had an experience that almost led to her being drowned. Many years later for one of her music videos, she wanted to include a scene of her jumping off a 40-foot cliff to showcase Northern Ontario. Initial hesitation eventually took a backseat to potential reward:

You don't know what's floating underneath. It would look really cool in the video to have that particular scene 'cuz it is a really, really tall cliff. And it does really show northern Ontario. ... I said, 'OK, yeah, we'll do it.' And we got up there and [my partner Kevin's] going 'OK, let's go.' I'm like 'No, I can't do it, I can't do it.' ... My heart was boom! boom! boom! What if I break my neck? What if there's a log? What if my leg gets crushed under whatever? I can't see underneath there ... Kevin had my hand and he just squished it and then [sharp intake of breath] and my breath and everything, [another intake] it felt like forever before we actually hit the water. And we went in and bubbles and everything were everywhere. Feet everywhere. Arms everywhere. And then I just popped up out of the water and I was OK. It was an absolutely exhilarating, just crazy feeling ... that feeling of being trapped under water [was] a pretty humbling experience.

Shy-Anne did not describe her relationship with fear as adversarial, as something to conquer. Instead, she described it this way:

When you have fear inside you, ... [it] gives you adrenaline rushes and energy boosts. It's almost like it's the fear that makes you want to do it more. Just like, OK, if I'm this scared of it, that means that it's something that I really want to do.

Her experiences suggest that her relationship with fear, at least in the contexts that she discussed in our conversations, was one that points to capability rather than helplessness.

Likewise with Robin. When she and I met, she was 50 and divorced from a 22-year marriage that shaped her identity as a "perfect middle-class housewife." Her "bubble-wrapped life" was a departure from her childhood as a "badass."

“I’d do anything,” she said. “I’d run my bike over anything. I would do all kinds of crazy outdoor stuff.” Her adventurous spirit was stopped in its tracks when she was sexually assaulted at the age of 10, instilling within her a profound sense of worthlessness and a need to control her world, as though to ward off further attacks. Perfectionism wedged its way into her life, manifested in her identity as, to use her analogy, a mother in the fashion of “June Cleaver,” the prim-and-proper stay-at-home mom from the 1950s American sitcom, *Leave it to Beaver*. After her divorce, she recognized the need to rebuild her identity, leaving June Cleaver behind.

Her relationship with fear has shifted over the years in accordance with her changing circumstances. She said in an email, “Now I embrace fear but it wasn’t always so.” Remaining comfortable in middle-class suburbia trapped her to perfectionism and worthlessness. Robin took it upon herself to take risks, as she used to do before being sexually assaulted when she was a girl. She recounts going kayaking with her friend, Simon, who she credits as helping her regain what was taken from her:

The third time he pulls me out [of the water], I’m standing on the banks of the river and I’m like, ‘I’m not getting back in that boat.’ ... He’s like, ‘Robin, you’ll never be able to walk out of here. It takes, like, two hours.’ ‘I’ll be here if it takes me all damn day. I’m not getting back in that boat.’ And so, then he says, ‘Well, you’ll never get the boat out of here.’ ‘The boat can sit here and rot. I’m not getting back in the boat.’ ... And, of course, I got back in the boat. ... What I’ve learned from my adventures with Simon is that life happens when the water’s moving. Fear is where the fun starts.... But you don’t have fun until you’re out there in the water, in the scary part. Sometimes life hands you things that are rapids. If you have great self-rescue skills and you can pick yourself up out of that, that’s great ‘cuz it’s always safer in the boat.

For Robin, then, fear points her in the direction of not only fun, but personal growth through reclaiming what was lost. “Badass” Robin was able to reemerge. She said with exuberance, “The first time I went mountain biking, all of the sudden there was this joy. ... This moment of joy and this moment of just overcoming this fear of being outside, of risking, of risking injury, of risking whatever, god it filled my soul so much that I said I’ve got to have more of this. And so, I started mountain biking heavily. I started kayaking. And paragliding.” Robin expressed her philosophical relationship with fear this way:

Why not today, you know? What I have I got else to do? Life’s really, really short and when you savor those moments, it’s so sweet. That’s what fear gives me. Facing your fear is what *sets your soul free*. For so much of my life, I lived in this capsule of perfection and now I think part of why I did that was the risk of failure and the risk of looking and feeling worthless again. ... Success isn’t that I did it well, ‘cuz I suck at paragliding. Success is that I dared to risk. That’s a success. Like I said, my soul is just, I’m a different person. It’s changed everything fundamentally about who I am. [Italics added.]

For Robin and Shy-Anne, fear represents opportunity. Shy-Anne found opportunity to assert power over her eating disorder through nude modeling and, later, she grew as an artist by recording songs, performing in front of audiences, and jumping off a cliff for a music video. Robin, meanwhile, reacquainted herself with the sense fun and joy that had been robbed from her when she was a child, discovering what was lost when she risked her own safety in a controlled way through recreational activities that she pursued with friends.

Similarly, Cathy looks at fear for its hopeful potential. Cathy was in her late 40s when we met, having removed herself from an abusive marriage. She and her current husband have two daughters. She is a teacher and, in our conversations, she discussed her fear of losing her job, a worry that was eventually realized when she was bumped from her position by a more senior teacher. Life used to be what she described as “losing at a poker game.” “The worst thing that I was doing to myself,” she said, “was allowing the fear to control me and keep me trapped.” “Navigating fear” offered Cathy an avenue for emancipation from an unhealthy work environment and an unhealthy marriage. For Cathy, fear simultaneously played the role of beacon of hope, and harbinger of danger and misery.

I learned that while you can't eliminate anxiety and you can't eliminate fear, you also don't have to be a slave to it. Making the decision in the negative because of fear really just serves to continue the entrapment. It is better I think to make decisions based on hope.

What Cathy seems to suggest is that fear and hope are not mutually exclusive but, rather, work in concert with each other, as they have done to help her to arrest a pattern of losing at the proverbial poker game. Cathy, Shy-Anne, and Robin collectively suggest that fear is something, a metaphorical voice, perhaps, that informs the making of decisions and choices. Those decisions and choices might be to experience fun and joy, to grow personally by doing that which gives rise to anxiety and to navigate a journey through fear and finding hope along the way. In this way, fear informs, warns, and guides.

Fear as pragmatic

Some of the participants offered a narrative of fear that depicted it less as relational and more as utility, an instrumental device to be used for a particular purpose. Sean, for instance, indicated that his anxieties are largely founded upon the unknown aspects of his life, especially when he is faced with a decision or a new opportunity. At the time of our conversations, Sean was in his early forties, married, and had a child on the way. A seasoned teacher now, Sean experienced a significant moment when he was doing a practicum during his teacher-training:

I was just petrified and I would be just so scared—SCARED!—I nearly quit because I thought again it was irrational fears. Things like, the scrutiny by my sponsor teacher ... and the faculty advisor and the sort of all these eyes looking at

you and you're sort of going 'You know you're feeling judged, you're feeling like every single flaw that you're in your practice is being examined and criticized even by 14-year-olds which I'd later realize isn't really the case in most cases.

To avoid feeling petrified, he over-prepares, which is what he did on the first day of his first teaching practicum. He described his preparation as "border-line-compulsive" and, even now when he chairs a committee, he uses Robert's Rules "to the nth degree to make sure that things went in a certain way." To prepare means to assert control over an imminent situation or challenge. Sean disclosed that he learned to avoid unpredictable situations from growing up under his father's alcoholism, describing him as a "Jekyll and Hyde drunk." He connected his father's drunken behaviour to his processes with navigating unknowns:

He goes from being quiet and mild mannered to being annoying, like a first-class pain in the ass. So, I think between his drinking and his temper, you never knew what you were going to get. ... My childhood with him became unpredictable.... I left home when I was young ... I think that a lot of the way that I do things stems out of that because by not knowing what's going to happen, if I can rationalize every single situation in terms of potential then, more often than not, I'm ready for whatever is going to happen.

While he could not control what mood his father might be in when he was drunk, he could assert control over other aspects of his life to gain information on the unknowns. Planning, preparing, and mitigating the unknowns are about anticipating, as much as possible, what might be ahead and to gather information to demonstrate his capabilities to others and to himself. Spontaneity tends to take a back seat in Sean's life. He said that spontaneity is

not a word that I would use to describe myself all that often. ...I have been criticized of not being spontaneous by people especially, girlfriends, in the past. ... [My wife] will attest to this ...when plans change suddenly, ...it takes me awhile for me to right myself. ... If I've got my day compartmentalized in my mind and then something spontaneous comes up, I'll oftentimes be reluctant to say "Sure, let's go do that" ... and even if whatever this is not terribly important, then my instinct is not to be spontaneous. But, I think because I'm aware of that, I'm more spontaneous than I used to be because ... lack of spontaneity is not something that everybody likes in a person.

A dual process seems to be at play when Sean navigates fear. One purpose is to gather information and plan, while the other is to recognize how being perceived as inflexible may lead others to think negatively about him. Thus, he has become more apt to enter into spontaneity in some situations than when he was younger. He recognizes, however, that guarding against the unknown is the more dominant approach for him. He said in relation to letting down his compulsion towards control, "OK, I know I'm fighting against my nature, but, you gotta suck it up sometimes."

Sean's nature, as he sees it, is to plan against circumstances that might be out of his control. Lee described a similar disposition as "avoiding the worst-case scenario." At the age of 59, Lee acquired her PhD in education after 8 years in the program. Her program was her second attempt at a PhD, the first of which was in geology when she was in her twenties. Not completing it precipitated her anxiety that she felt all through her second PhD program, saying that, "it was a huge risk because I did not want to NOT finish a second time. So, I was anxious about all of that from the very outset." Like Sean, Lee's anxiety revolves around not knowing what might happen or what might be the best choice and approach in any given situation. Ultimately, however, it is the "fear of the worst-case scenario" that made her finish her PhD on the second attempt. Her strategy of what she called "deliberate immersion" was put into practice on the second PhD attempt, necessary because it was "in a different field, in a different country, and at an older age. AND with a history of having tried before." Lee credits her ultimate success in the program to her strategy of gathering information, not unlike Sean, specifically drawing from others' experience:

I really feel like connecting with other people ... to find out what their experiences have been and how they dealt with things and how they understand things. I remember the very first course I had to take. It was a seminar and I didn't know how to write papers in education lingo. I didn't know what they were looking for, so I did actually find someone who had taken the course before and she was very...kindly shared all her papers with me. [to] see how someone might come to think about things. And then I could take it up in my own way.

Lee discussed a precedent in her life that helped to provide a knowledge-acquisition framework, recounting a story about how she felt about spiders:

We lived in Australia before we moved to Canada and ... there's all kind of things to be afraid of in the natural world in Australia: snakes and spiders and And so, we were ripe for being teased about all these horrible things that could happen to you. ... So, I took [our] kids to the shows where they had spiders on displays. We went up close and personal with spiders in order understand them. And we lived with them ...without being afraid all the time. So, there's a deliberate immersion in understanding as much as possible about what we were afraid of in order to not be afraid.

Her taking steps to learn to live with spiders was, for Lee, a metaphor for forging ahead and completing her PhD in the sense of making and executing a plan to gather new knowledge by which to come to new perspectives. She said in email, "I used to be afraid of fear and tension, but now see it/them as opportunities to come to new understandings—even though it can be very challenging emotional work." Completing the PhD under the circumstances she described and learning to cohabitate with spiders may seem thematically disconnected, but, for Lee, they speak to the same issue, not only as opportunities to learn but also as problems to solve.

Mary adopts the same perspective regarding opportunities. She is a self-described introvert. At 25, she decided to uproot her life and move to the prairies where she embarked on a master's program. A sojourn to Iceland three years ago prepared her for living with uncertainty and reaping its benefits. She described the whole experience as "amazing" but not because of usual tourist experiences.

Throwing herself "in the fire" is how Mary faces challenges that give rise to fear but I was staying with a family and working on their dairy farm and I didn't know these people they were complete strangers and that's kind of scary, you know, like I'm going to Northern Iceland to work on a dairy farm for a month. I don't speak the language at all and it was uncomfortable at first, it stretched me, it was difficult, it was hard work, ... I realized I was so much more capable than I ever thought I was. ... I actually went back last year and I'm going back again this summer because I love that place, and I love these people. Yet, moment-to-moment, I'm not always having the best time as I'm milking the 47th cow and I'm tired, and my hands hurt and a ten-year old son just came up to me and said something in Icelandic that I don't understand, but at the end of the day, I've learned so much and I just realize that I'm so much more capable than I ever thought I was.

She does not do so carelessly. Unlike Sean and Lee who gather information to strategize through problems related to fear, Mary sees fear as information, itself.

I'm an athlete. So sometimes pain is telling you you're hurting your body, stop. ... So, there are two kinds of pain and I think pain is information, it's not necessarily an injury. And so, I think fear is the same thing. Fear is information. Sometimes it's saying that it is freaking dangerous; don't do it. Like, you know? You gotta listen to it. And sometimes that's the information it's giving you and sometimes the information it's giving you is 'This is really big, it's going to stretch you.'

Mary's perspective of fear as information offers her the option of what she calls "worst-case-scenario'ing it out," which is the action-version of the similar approach adopted by Sean and Lee of gathering information. In the context of rock-climbing, Mary described her rationale this way:

I've checked my knots, I've checked my harness. I'm clipping in all the way up. ... Worst case scenario [is that] I fall off the hold. What's going to happen? My rope is going to catch me and I'm going to sway. It's going to scary, but I'm going to be fine. Right? Whereas if I was looking at ... climbing outdoors and I'm like, 'Hey that's a great big rock with sharp rocks underneath' and I haven't got a rope and that looks scary. When you worst-case-scenario-it-out, you go, 'Worst case scenario [is that] I fall on the rocks and I die. Let's not do this.'

The impetus for Mary's perspective that fear as information fosters calculated risks is a philosophical standpoint: "You never grow and change if you're comfortable," she summarized at the end of our interview. It is precisely the notion of comfort, specifically discomfort, that signals to Cécile that she needs to take ac-

tion. She said that fear “tells me I’m in trouble and I might ... be helpless.” When we spoke, Cécile was 57 and had just acquired her PhD. She also teaches Level I Kayaking. As an avid and certified kayaker, Cécile has capsized many times in the process of developing the skill to teach others. She recounts the process as she experienced it:

[T]hat feeling of helplessness ... probably intensifies the level of fear to a place of panic. ... The thing that’s also true for me is that I’ve actually capsized on trips more than anybody I know. ... [The] first time that I capsized, my anxiety was overwhelming prior to the capsize. It was a legitimate anxiety because I really did not have the skills to get out of the situation I was in. But once I was in the water, I had to problem-solve. I had to deal with it. At that point, the anxiety was gone and I just, we just carried on.

What it means to “carry on” is, for Cécile, the process of problem-solving. Fear indicates to her that problems have arisen that need her attention. She does not focus on fear itself but on what fear signifies. As she has done when she has capsized in her kayak, she assesses what is going on in any given situation that triggers fear and takes action. “OK, you’re not completely helpless,” she says, as though articulating a conversation she has with herself in those moments. “You’re not going to die.’ ... So, the more targeted I can be, the more I’m focused on problem solving.”

She continued by describing the benefit of fear more bluntly:

Fear and anxiety are beneficial in the sense that, hopefully it will keep you from doing really stupid things, or taking on risks that are too great. I have a friend who did some teaching and he has said to me before, ‘If you’re not scared when you’re doing a crossing [in a kayak], you’re being stupid.’

Perhaps Cécile’s recognition of the pitfalls of stupidity serves a parallel function as Sean’s and Lee’s urge to collect information and plan, and Mary’s preference for “worst-case-scenario’ing it out.” All of these participants speak to functional aspects of fear based on sound reason. Cécile summarized her perspective that fear can be a useful, if not necessary, tool to work through problems and challenges related to fear. She said that fear has “propelled me to problem-solve in ways that I think have been quite productive.”

Fear as motivation

Closely related to the element of pragmatics is the function of control, specifically how fear can give rise to exercising control when it might be possible to do so as a motivational mechanism. The metaphor employed by Nick—getting in the race—captures his orientation towards personal development. In his early 30s, Nick is a varsity runner and doctoral-level scholar. Although he is a high-achiever, social anxiety results in ambivalence about standing out from his achievements.

He explained that, “If there’s been times when I’ve been hesitant to do things, it’s because of the fear of judgment. That’s probably my main limitation, is that social fear.” He recounts an experience of feeling embarrassed in public early in his running career:

When we were doing the competitions,... I handled it fairly well for the first couple of races; I was top 3 in the city. But the very last one, ... I couldn’t take the pressure anymore and I dropped out of the race. ... So that was a big stepping stone, so that the failure in that last critical race was the reason why I went further with running in the long term than had I done really well ... When I stopped running on that last day, on that last competition, I dropped out of the race. ... I couldn’t let it go. ... After the race, I was really upset. That was the first race my parents went to go watch me at. They didn’t really know I was taking it that seriously at that point. What did they see? Their son drop out of a race. That’s not very awe inspiring.

Backing away from the race rather than getting in it taught Nick a lesson about himself. He described how fear of social reproach serves his drive to achieve, saying that the

fear of judgment can be a positive motivator in some ways in terms of producing high quality work. You have to have a mixture between fear and fearlessness because if all you’re trying to do is please other people with anything in life, you’re probably not going to please anyone and you’re probably not going to do anything of much note. So, I think you have to learn how to master, to use the energy that fear might give you to make you do fearless things.

What Nick seems to indicate is the practice of developing the skill of harnessing energy—in this case, the energy of fear—is to fuel success. Such skill is indicative of exercising measures of control, apparent in his insight that the discipline of running “taught me a lot of lessons on how to deal with pressure, fear, how to learn how to master something, the kind of deliberate work you do on a daily basis for a long time.” In running, as in life, “getting in the race” and working with the energy of fear is, for Nick, an essential component of what it means to achieve and to learn about his capabilities.

Asserting the motivation to “get in the game” mirrors Marty’s refusal to be “owned” by difficult or challenging situations. A 24-year old graduate student, Marty has struggled with the fear of not doing well academically. He has also struggled with mental illness, having experienced a severe bout of depression in the second year of his university studies. Refusing to allow “something to take control” of him, Marty described how he felt about his depression:

[W]hen I started to become depressed, I was in a denial phase. I didn’t want to accept that I was insufficient and that I wasn’t as mentally strong as somebody should be. ... I was afraid of admitting that I had a problem because I had always seen myself as a strong person and I didn’t want to have that weakness. ... Right

now, I'm afraid of going back [to] being depressed. It was painful. . . . So, I've taken precautions and I'm always reflecting on how I feel and how I'm doing and learning from my mistakes so it doesn't happen again because I am absolutely . . . it's one of the things that scares me the most.

Put differently, Marty would say that he fears being “owned” by depression and so takes steps to avoid a full relapse. He learned about the benefits of controlling a situation before he is controlled by it through an experience he had with grade 9 science.

I went into chemistry because I thought it was hard. I remember I was back in grade 8 and I went over to my neighbor's house and he was taking grade 9 science and they were doing the chemistry unit. He opens up the textbook and he shows me the periodic table . . . I was just kind of dumbfounded, like, ‘Whoa! This is what they do in high school. This is chemistry!’ So, . . . I worked really hard at it because I accepted that notion beforehand that it was hard. It made me afraid of it and that's what drove me to actually do well and take it seriously. . . . I was expecting it to be a huge obstacle and a hurdle but that actually caused me to work harder at it because I was just afraid of failing at it.

In other words, Marty felt motivated to “own” chemistry but, later, ended up feeling owned by Physics 11, saying that,

I didn't think physics was that hard but then the first test, I got my mark back and it was 57. And I've never, ever gotten anything in the 50s in my life! It was a shock to me. I was disappointed in myself. . . . I was nervous about telling my parents that I did poorly. I remember going into the bathroom . . . and I was angry and I punched the door and I was just, it was a turning point for me. In the next unit, I did my homework literally every single day, worked every single question, and I probably got 95% on the next test.

At one point in our discussion, Marty used the phrase “obliterate me” to describe what he feared would happen if he were to become “owned by a subject.” Given what he felt was at stake, he exercised control to, in a sense, win battle over the subjects in school that challenged his academic capabilities. Those experiences taught him that he must take risks to achieve. “I see something that I think I can't do, I have to learn how to do it,” he said. He continued by connecting his orientation towards high achievement with fear: “[I]f I see something that I'm afraid to do, . . . I have to figure out how to do it. I've always found that, if I'm afraid of something, or if I think something's hard, I naturally gravitate towards it.”

For Nick and Marty, fear of social embarrassment or failure at various tasks is a clear motivator to achieve. Unlike other participants who spoke of fear in terms of relationality – a voice that guides - and pragmatics – a tool for decision-making – Nick and Marty indicated a somewhat contradictory perspective on fear in relation to achievement, at once as part adversary that threatens their sense of their own abilities and their public identities, and part mobilizer that steers them towards success through adversity.



Vindicating fear

In his 2012 book, *Fear: Essential wisdom for getting through the storm*, Buddhist scholar, activist, and philosopher Thích Nhat Hanh claimed that “Fearlessness is not only possible, it is the ultimate joy. When you touch nonfear, you are free” (p. 6). The stories featured here demonstrate that, on the contrary, fear can be channeled to enhance agency, possibility, freedom, and even joy. Cécile demonstrates such potential, both in calculated risk and exhilaration, in the accompanying photograph (included here with Cécile’s permission):

The narratives featured here capture a moment in time for each participant. Had I conducted interviews on other days, I may have received different responses, as a matter of chance. Participants might have had additional insights and stories, or fewer, based on mood, mental clarity, ability to focus, and other circumstantial factors out of my control. The purpose of the research was not to lock these participants in time. Perhaps some of them might have different or even contrary perspectives if I were to interview them today. The purpose, instead, was to gain

insight from their perception and articulation of their experience with reconceptualizing fear. I would describe all of the participants as high-achieving people, which is perhaps what drew them to participate in the first place. Nevertheless, these narratives offer insights on agency and engagement that can be employed by most people in various ways. Whether as a voice that encourages and motivates people to go beyond what they perceive to be their limitations, or as a mechanism that provides information and helps to discern a course of action, or yet as a beacon of potential failure that motivates dedication and discipline to achieve goals, fear can serve a positive and constructive purpose in people's lives, as it has done with the participants featured here. Recognizing fear as purposeful can disrupt the dominant narratives of shame and control that circulate in modern society. Beyond the usual notions of overcoming fear or pretending to be fearless, fear is woven deeply into human experience and can, if looked at positively, be harnessed for the development of personal agency and social identity through achievement.

Notes

¹ Fourteen people were interviewed, ranging in age from 24 to 59, but I feature 9 here to highlight the most prominent themes discerned through data collection.

² Names are pseudonyms except for participants who gave me permission to use their real first name. In accordance with participants' written consent, locations and other information may or may not be disguised.

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