

FIGHT OR FLIGHT? COPING WITH THE FEAR OF TERRORISM

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October 2001

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." — Franklin D. Roosevelt

THE YEAR was 1968, I was in third grade, and the United States and the Soviet Union were embroiled in a psychological tug-of-war. As a child of only nine years of age, I did not fully comprehend Cold War events—including the threat of nuclear holocaust—that undoubtedly spawned much fear across the nation, and even the world.

In the interests of preparation and preservation, my third grade teacher, Mrs. Stokes, instructed the class to bring a clean and empty Clorox bleach jug with us to school by a certain date. We did as instructed, and when the assigned day came, we filled our jugs with water, and labeled them with our names. I vividly remember going down into the lonely passageway—serving as a makeshift fallout shelter—below Academy Park Elementary School in Salt Lake City, Utah. I can even still see the Principal putting a single drop of chlorine in each one of our jugs as we looked on in the dimly lit tunnel. Thankfully, we never had reason to make use of our stored water. I can only imagine how events of that era—along with fear and uncertainty of the future—undermined one's sense of personal security.

Then along came the '80's and the '90's, and the fear of doom and gloom from thermo-nuclear destruction gradually eased up.

Now here we are, nearly two months into the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and four Airliners. I doubt any of us will ever purge those vivid images of the airliner hitting the South Tower, and the subsequent collapse of both Towers. Indeed, these images have been burned into our national psyche. I cannot fathom the grief and agony the family and friends of those killed are facing, and my heart goes out to them.

On the heels of this tragedy—and without a moment to catch our breath—came the current and ongoing bio-terrorism threat, most notably, the anthrax scare. Around the world, and especially in America, people have been jolted from a state of relative peace and safety to a state of profound concern—fear—for their lives, and their *way of life*.

Alas, fear has tightened its tenacious grip once again.

As a result, Americans are turning to counselors and therapists in mass numbers to try to deal with the trauma, as well as make some sense of recent events (if indeed any sense *can* be made of it).

As a case in point, Amy, a forty-something single mom, conveyed to me in a recent coaching session her deep fear and uncertainty of the future directly related to the acts of terrorism in New York and Washington D.C. She was experiencing terrible nightmares of the events, and was concerned about whether any of us—including her daughter—would even have a future. In a very

sober and deliberate tone of voice, she looked at me square in the eye and asked, "Do you think they will kill us?"

Her frightened and sincere demeanor deeply impressed upon me the severity of the trauma that so many are experiencing now. In an effort to reassure her, and to help her gain a healthy viewpoint on the matter, I shared the following perspective with her.

PERMISSION TO FEEL

We are all human beings, and a powerful aspect of our human nature is the "fight or flight" response to fear and danger. To maintain a healthy balance in life—not to mention our mental wellness—we must perceive and identify *when* to fight and *when* to flee. We all harbor fear of some kind, whether real or imagined (and most of our fears are imagined). Harboring unrealistic fear disempowers us, and leads to emotional immobility. Fear is also a powerful factor in self-limiting behavior; it throws us into confusion, and robs us of our sense of control—why do you think fear is the primary weapon of terrorists? Aside from the threat of immediate personal danger, it is imperative that we do not give in and run away from our fears.

Even though it is our human nature to *feel* emotions such as fear at times, somehow we do not usually give ourselves *permission* to feel these emotions, perhaps thinking that doing so somehow makes us weak. Ironically, we still feel them anyway, but we do so with a measure of guilt and shame.

One of the most significant mental-wellness lessons I've ever discovered is to *give myself permission to feel, experience, and explore my emotions as they arise*, and *without* guilt and shame. I invite you to contemplate the following perspective with an open heart and mind: "IT IS OKAY TO FEEL AFRAID IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT EVENTS! IT IS OKAY!" You would simply not be human if you didn't feel *some* fear.

An interesting and intriguing phenomenon occurs when we cease resisting ourselves, and accept that it is okay to experience a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. Emotions, such as fear (in this case), lose their power to drag us down and cloud our minds with dispiriting uncertainties. The energy and control that fear once had over us drains away, placing us in a much more empowering position to see things in perspective; a greater sense of calm and clear thinking results.

Why not acknowledge and take ownership of your fear? Say out loud with conviction: "I ACKNOWLEDGE AND ACCEPT MY FEAR; AND FURTHERMORE, I GIVE MY SELF FULL AND UNEQUIVOCAL PERMISSION TO BE AFRAID AND WITHOUT GUILT!" Say it again. Be passionate. Believe it. Mean it. IT IS OKAY TO BE AFRAID. DO NOT RUN AWAY FROM YOUR FEAR!

Only when you acknowledge your humanity by giving yourself permission to be a real-live human being who is afraid at times, will you be able to move forward and overcome an unhealthy and self-limiting sense of fear.

THINKING IN PERSPECTIVE

Once we have permitted ourselves to acknowledge and feel our fear, it is important to confront it, lest it run amuck and take us with it. Fear, given free reign, is responsible for innumerable current and historical atrocities, none the least of which were the Salem Witch Trials in the 17th century.

As with most things in life, we can harbor a healthy or unhealthy sense of fear. To maintain a healthy balance, we must confront our fear with a rational mind; look at the current world situation in

perspective. An excellent article from the American Psychological Association's website (www.apa.org), underscores the importance of perspective:

"Changing one's perspective to match the proportion of the actual threat can help keep the fear of 'what is going to happen next' from growing out of proportion to the actual risk."

Ponder this perspective:

- Imagine that today is Sunday, December 7, 1941. Japan has just bombed Pearl Harbor, resulting in 2,395 deaths, and plunging the U.S. into World War 2. What is going through your mind right now? Fear?
- Now fast forward to Friday, November 22, 1963. The headlines read, "Today the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, was Assassinated." This event will be "one of the most shocking public moments of 20th century America" (www.atomica.com). Now what is going through your mind? Fear?
- Once again, move forward to Wednesday, April 19, 1995. The Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was just bombed by terrorists, resulting in 168 deaths. Again, what is going through your mind? No doubt, fear again.

I could go on and on, but do you see a pattern? Has anything *really* changed over the years? No. Ominous events still strike fear in our hearts, but—at the risk of sounding callous—life goes on, and will go on. It *must* go on.

It is obvious that we need to keep a healthy perspective with regard to terrorism. Just because momentous and tragic events have once again occurred so close to home is not in itself indicative that we are any closer to annihilation than we were during the Cold War, or any other time for that matter. Things happen, but they soon take a backseat in favor of other, more pressing matters in our lives. Hence, we don't quickly remember the fear we felt over past events.

Undoubtedly, a major reason that so many are in fear right now is due to continual mass media coverage of terrorist acts. One can literally watch coverage all day and all night on TV. It's in the newspaper every day. It's on the radio. It's everywhere. Don't forget: sensationalism is fundamental to news coverage. It sells.

Consider another example: Did you know that, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (www-fars.nhtsa.dot.gov), 41,611 people died in auto related accidents in the U.S. during 1999? Furthermore, *another 3.3 million were injured*. The fact that every human life is precious notwithstanding, this is far more than die at the hands of terrorists. There is only one difference between dying from terrorism and getting killed in an auto accident: Intent. But both happen without warning, and both will get you killed. Can you honestly say that you live in fear of dying in an auto accident? I'm betting the answer is no. Then why harbor an unhealthy fear from dying or getting injured from terrorism?

COPE WITH FEAR BY TAKING ACTION WITHIN

This past October 7th, the United States, with the cooperation and support of Great Britain and many other nations, began a long-overdue campaign to find, dismantle, and bring down terrorist cells, including the nations that support them. Terrorists are nothing short of barbaric control freaks who

show malicious contempt for human life. I firmly believe in the civilized world's ability to dispossess terrorists from their stronghold of committing crimes against humanity and seeding fear throughout the world.

Most of us are not individually involved directly in these actions; nevertheless, we can still take action within. This may even lead to taking positive action in regard to things outside of ourselves. Following are some practical suggestions for taking action and coping with fear:

1. Acknowledge the "fight or flight" aspect to your human nature. Give yourself permission to feel your fear, but don't stop there.
2. Use your powers of rational thinking to see and understand current world events in the proper perspective. Don't rationalize your fear, nor go overboard. Create a healthy balance.
3. Confront your fear. Take your power back. Resolve to make a stand against fear based on your inalienable human right to freedom and to a life without the threat of terrorism.
4. Control what you can control. Blatantly refuse to be undermined by unhealthy fear. Do not play into the hand of cowardly terrorists who use fear in their attempts to destroy the spirit and soul of humanity.
5. Contribute in sensible and charitable ways as available and prudent.
6. Talk to others. Express your feelings and concerns. Listen to theirs. Share your healthy perspective of fear and current world events with them as the opportunity arises.
7. Position yourself as a pillar of rational and clear thinking; a person with high core values who does not buy into a destructive and unhealthy fear of terrorism. Offer yourself as a stabilizing influence to those who would strike out against people of other nationalities out of fear.
8. Limit your exposure to media coverage. Again, use balance.
9. Do not hesitate to talk to a trained counselor or therapist if necessary. There is no shame in doing so.
10. Help your children to understand the situation in perspective, as they are able. They feel fear too, and don't automatically know how to process it.

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Yes, it is clear that the world has undergone many changes and developments over the past few decades. Difficult times come and go, but we as a race continue on. With each passing decade, humanity evolves just a little bit more. Perhaps one day, the world and life will be far less stressful and tense—kind of like a peaceful childhood.

As for me, I can't help but look back to 1968, third grade, and a world that was very different from today. Or was it?

Additional Resources on Managing and Coping with Fear from the American Psychological Association (APA):

- **Handling Anxiety In The Face Of The Anthrax Scare** (<http://helping.apa.org/daily/anthrax.html>)
- **Coping with the Aftermath of a Disaster: John Tassej, Ph.D. Answers Your Questions** (<http://helping.apa.org/daily/tassej.html>)
- **Managing Traumatic Stress: Tips for Recovering From Disasters and Other Traumatic Events** (<http://helping.apa.org/daily/traumaticstress.html>)
- **Warning Signs of Trauma Related Stress** (<http://www.apa.org/practice/ptsd.html>)

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