

# **The Courage to Fear**

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I'd like to dedicate my talk to the memory of Paul Wellstone. His life, his choice to take big risks against high odds, is at the very heart of my message about the possibilities open to us if we see fear with new eyes.

Now to begin:

Think of it. You and I just happen to be born in an extraordinary, unprecedented era - the first moment in the evolution of our species in which we humans are aware both that we - not some supernatural force -- are the creators our world and yet, at the same time, we're aware that it doesn't feel like our creation at all. Hmm. How contradictory. How bewildering.

In prior epochs, couldn't we breathe a bit easier, believing the gods were responsible, or maybe that some potentate or other was in charge and, well, so be it? Yet, today, we have no such easy out. We know we're doing it. But at the same time, we also know that not one of us would consciously choose this crazy world.

We can't imagine even the most callous among us, getting up in the morning, and saying: "Yes, I want another child to die of hunger. Yet over 30,000 are dying today from hunger and hunger-related disease around the world. Not one of us would arise and add to our day's checklist: How can I contribute to global warming? Or, what can I do to eradicate one more species? Or how can I make sure that in this new century, violence -- costing over 100 million mostly civilians -- lives in the last century, continues to spread?"

So, if we feel that just living in this world has become more and more effortful, there may be good reason. Our inner compass - our common sense and innate desire to sustain life - is jarred each day by the contrast between the world out there and the world inside. Of course, there's long been such a contrast, probably from the beginning of what we ironically call "civilization" but, I believe, what's different in our epoch is that more and more of us find ourselves unable to assign the "blame" elsewhere, unable to find a cause in something over which we have zero control.

So, we know we humans are responsible; yet that doesn't feel right either, since we can't imagine our fellow humans willingly choosing this world-in-decline.

If you will forgive my audacity, I'd like to lay out for you how I understand this paradox. I've been asking myself for decades: What could be powerful enough to create a world that none of us feels we're choosing? So powerful as to create a world we can't identify as ours?

There is only one thing that powerful, I've concluded. It is the power of ideas.

Here, one social philosopher in particular has influenced me. Many of my generation will remember him - Erich Fromm. A few years ago I read his book, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. In it is one sentence which will stay with me forever: "It is man's humanity which makes him so inhumane."

Fromm then explains that it is the human being's unique capacity and need to construct ideas about reality that determine almost literally what we see and what we cannot see. It is one's frame of orientation, as he calls it, that shapes what we believe our nature to be and what, therefore, we believe possible.

All well and good, if our frame - what Anna and I in *Hope's Edge* call our mental map - is life serving. But, what if it's a disaster, if our map instead puts us on a death march? I've come to believe, unfortunately, that many features of the dominant Western mental map formed over the last three centuries, and now going global, is just that - life denying.

Within the dominant mental map, human beings are reduced to a caricature of ourselves, as nothing more than selfish little accumulators, ego-centered materialists. With that view of ourselves, it follows logically that, of course, we can do no better than to turn over our fate to the market; we're too selfish, after all, to come together to deliberate over a desirable common future. (You know, that quaint thing called the democracy!) As we then abdicate citizenship in favor of market outcomes, more and more of life becomes a mere commodity - from health care to school lunches, from water to seeds.

And where does this shrunken view of human nature leave us?

Most troubling, it denies two deep human needs - our need for effectiveness, for shaping the world beyond our own survival; and it denies our need for connection, for bonds based on genuine caring not merely on market exchange.

Symptoms of this denial of ourselves are found, I believe, in spreading emotional pain. Worldwide, for example, suicide - the ultimate act of despair - now exceeds homicide deaths by half. Depression, World Health Organization tells us, has grown to be the fourth leading cause of loss of productive life.

The dominant mental map expects us to cut off our fellow feeling -- even though scientists are now finding that cooperative behaviors are imbedded in our biology. Researchers at Emory University in Atlanta, for example, used an fMRI to detect brain responses while subjects pursued the well-known simulation game, Prisoner's Dilemma. They admitted surprise to find the "brightest signals arose in cooperative alliances and in those neighborhoods of the brain already known to respond to desserts, pictures of pretty faces, money, cocaine and any number of licit or illicit delights." "It's reassuring; in some ways," note the scientists: "It says that we're wired to cooperate with each other."

These scientists were surprised only because their findings defy the dominant mental map. But they don't surprise our common sense; for how could we have survived as hunter gatherers without deeply embedded capacities for cooperation? (So, with scientists' backing, maybe you Quakers can inform reluctant consensus builders that cooperating doesn't mean subduing competitive natures; in fact, cooperation is just as tasty as chocolate!)

But having defined the problem as the dominant mental map, now, we must peel away another layer. For, if it's true that this map denies real human needs - our needs to "affect and connect" -- why do we go along? Why do we condone - and even take part in daily -- what violates our deepest sensibilities?

My one word answer?

Fear. Or, more specifically, fear of two kinds -- of the unknown and of being different.

But here things get even stickier. Unconsciously, we've assumed that fear is not a problem. To the contrary, it helps us survive. If we become ever more vigilant, staying always on alert, we'll pull through. After all, isn't one of the clearest lessons of 9-11 that we could have prevented the horror if we'd just had in place better detection systems?

In this inherited mindset, fear is an instinctual and fixed response to stimuli. It's that uncomfortable, sometimes almost unbearable, bodily feeling we assume to be an accurate reading of threat. Fear tells us what to avoid. Its message is unmistakable: something is wrong, so we must stop, fight, flee. That's it.

Or is it?

When the primary threats humans faced were lion attacks, this understanding of fear's role in helping to ensure our survival made a lot sense. But what if this notion of fear is outdated? What if, in today's world, our long-prized assurance of protection - fear as trusted signal of threat - may actually be keeping us trapped in a system that's killing us?

Here's what I mean:

The fight-or-flight response to fear - just accepting it unreflectively - may block us from seeing possibilities for acting in ways that could save us, as individuals and as societies. If true, our future may depend on whether we can achieve a radical shift in our inherited view of fear, whether we can learn to see fear with new eyes: Rather than warning that something is wrong; fear in certain circumstances can come to mean that something is just right.

My reasoning goes like this: To act effectively - a very deep human need -- to create solutions actually reversing the global death march requires that we:

Do something different than we are today, which is just another way of saying we must walk into the unknown.

And we risk being different, which by definition means that we risk separating from others.

At each of these prospects, fear has one standard response: "Oh no." Fear says, "Stop." The unknown is dangerous; and being different might result in expulsion from the tribe, which we learned eons ago meant death.

So if we listen to fear's old tune, we're blocked from doing the very things we must in order to survive. Listening to fear, we go back to the familiar; yet, it's the familiar that got us into this mess in the first place!

I've come to believe, however, that we can transform our experience of fear so that it becomes a highly creative force in our lives. We can begin to see fear linked positively, rather than negatively, to exactly what we need to survive. Fear may well be a signal that we're pushing our growth edge, that we are taking the risks to be true to ourselves. And can move from an unconscious to a conscious response to age-old feelings. But what do we do - how do we transform fear?

#### Five Thoughts to Help Us Find the Courage to Fear

One: Fear is pure energy. What we do with it is a choice.

While we often think of fear as originating in something outside of us - from terrorists' threats to a tightening job market -- in fact, fear is pure energy. It originates inside us - as does all human energy. Knowing that simple truth, we discover we can transmute this pure energy into creativity and courage.

One the most moving experiences of my life was sitting with Anna one night in Nairobi, Kenya, listening to Reverend Timothy Njoya, who had done what, until that moment, I thought no human being could do.

For preaching a pro-democracy message, despite repeated threats from a dictatorial government, Reverend Njoya was attacked in his home by seven sword-swinging assailants. A slight and agile man, despite all he'd been through, he playfully acts out for us what happened to him that night. As he describes his fingers being sliced off, his belly slashed open, he is chuckling! Me? My heart is beating wildly in my chest. Then he tells us that as he lay on the floor, certain he was dying, he began to give his treasures away to his attackers - to one, his favorite Bible; to another, his library, and so on.

What! I thought to myself, how can this be? How could anyone not respond with sheer terror and life-preserving aggression to such brutality? So I asked: "Dr. Njoya, isn't fear a natural response to threat? Isn't it instinctual? How have you mastered it?"

Sitting deep in the cushioned armchair, his sweet face framed by a stiff white priest's collar, Njoya paused for only a moment. Then he said, "Fear is an energy that comes from inside us, not outside. It neutral. So we can channel it into fear, paranoia, or euphoria, whatever we choose."

"Imagine a lion," he said, crouching. "When a lion sees prey, or a predator, it senses fear first. But instead of lunging blindly in defense or in attack, it recoils." Njoya moved back too, leaning on his left leg and crouching lower. "The lion pauses a moment, targets his energies. Then he springs.

"We can do the same. We can harness our would-be fears, harmonize our energies and channel them into courage." His whole body, his whole life, seemed to tell us, yes, this is possible. And, by the way, Reverend Njoya's response -- that of generosity in the face of inhumanity - so moved his assailants that it was they who rushed him to the hospital where doctors saved his life.

From that night onward, I have repeatedly reminded myself that I don't have to pray that fear will --finally, finally-- go away and leave me alone. I can instead recognize that it is within me, not in an external force. I can therefore harness fear and, like the lion taking aim, choose where and what I do with it.

When we begin to venture outside our trodden paths, we can learn to expect fear. We can learn to accept that the unknown is frightening to most of us, while coming to understand that it is through this walk into the unknown that we gain what we really seek not freedom from fear but joy in discovering that we have choice.

Two: to reverse the planetary march to disaster what our world needs is for each of us to listen to our deeper selves; yet, ironically, it's precisely in connecting with our distinct gifts that we face the terrifying prospect of being different and excluded. What to do? Rather than denying our need for connection; we can become more conscious choosers of connection.

For better or worse, our wonderfully social nature - recall the brain experimenters' findings I mentioned earlier? -- has a tricky double edge. Our need for acceptance is so intense that we often end up going along with that which violates our own good sense just so that we can avoid expulsion from our "tribe." This is perfectly understandable, when we realize that humans evolved in tribal cultures in which being cast out could literally bring death. No doubt we carry over that fear of exclusion today, as we relate to our peers and to the broader culture.

So perhaps a great deal of compassion for our species is in order. We evolved knowing our survival meant staying with the pack; now our planetary survival depends breaking from the pack. Wow. Yet this is a tall order! Something very hard for human beings.

Acknowledging this need-for-inclusion aspect of our social nature is a first step. The solution isn't to try to suppress it, though. That's probably not possible. It's to use it

consciously. We can deliberately choose to bring into our lives people who will approve and even celebrate the new aspects of ourselves we are bringing into being, people who will reinforce our risk taking.

This one choice influences all others. Since we inevitably absorb qualities of the people closest to us, a powerful tool for changing ourselves is carefully to choose a "tribe" with the qualities we are building.

In a sense, this is why Anna and I wrote *Hope's Edge* the way that we did, introducing our readers to risk-takers all over the planet who are breaking free from the dominant mental map. We hoped our readers, by vicariously rubbing elbows with such people, would come to realize that new tribe, or tribes, are emerging, and we join with them as we ourselves are willing to risk.

In other words, we can consciously choose how we meet our need for connection. And, in this process, sometimes we do face the ironic truth in order to create genuine connection we have to begin by breaking connection.

Which brings me to a third "thought" about fear.

Three: Sometimes we have to stop - facing our fear of the unknown -- before we can begin.

At 26, I was a graduate student in the School of Social Work at the University of California at Berkeley. I was pretty miserable. I knew that even if I were to succeed each day in what I set out to do, I would still not have addressed the roots of poverty I saw so stunting human potential. But I kept doing the fair housing work I was doing because, well, I didn't know what else to do.

The discomfort mounted. And so in the spring of 1969, fearing I'd end up never knowing why I was here on this little planet at all, I took a deep breath and made a personal vow: I won't do anything else to "save the world" until I understand how what I am doing relates to the underlying causes of deepening suffering, until I can explain to myself why I had chosen one path and not another.

That vow meant I had to stop. I had no structure, no external identity. I didn't have children so I couldn't even call myself a housewife. Yikes! I was terrified.

But soon something novel to me began to happen. I started listening. I started listening to myself, and I was astounded to discover that there were questions coming from inside me. Questions I had to answer. Questions that ultimately drew me to the agricultural library, a large basement catacomb at U.C. Berkeley, where I developed a research technique that has served me for 30 years. I call it "following my nose." I audited courses and attended community lectures. I read. I even learned to weave.

Some of you may recall that era, the late 1960s, a time of alarming predictions about the inevitability of famine. Could it be that humans have actually lost the race, that we'd overrun the earth's capacity? I had to figure this out for myself. Letting one question lead to the next, I unearthed information that would forever change my life: Not only is there enough food in the world to feed everyone but enough to make us all chubby.

To discover my own questions required wandering in this self-created void, allowing each question to lead me to the next. The process allowed me to see what my "experts" had missed, not because I was smarter or had more data, but because I listened to my own questions and let them lead me wherever they would. I had the advantage of starting at square one; whereas those "advanced" in the field had long ago leapt over it.

Creating a void, walking into the unknown, I discovered for the first time questions coming from inside me. They led to *Diet for a Small Planet* and ignited a life-long journey.

When I think of this lesson about fear of the unknown, of being willing to stop long enough to listen to one's own questions, I think of Muhammad Yunus.

While I was gazing out at the San Francisco Bay writing *Diet for a Small Planet*, Bangladesh, then still part of Pakistan, was fighting a bloody war of liberation. At the time, Muhammad Yunus was teaching at a university in Tennessee. "I thought I should be useful in building Bangladesh," Yunus told Anna and me. "I started teaching exactly the same thing I had taught economics.

"Instead of getting better, things were getting worse. Then in 1974 a terrible famine hit. People were dying in the streets. I lived in a beautiful bungalow on a hillside near the university and would walk by people dying. Then I came back to the classroom and gave my big lecture, and I said: 'What is this?' I felt completely empty.

"I came to the conclusion that these theories were useless for these dying people," Yunus told Anna and me. "I realized I could help people as a human being, not as an economist. So I decided to become a basic human being. I think that was a good decision for me because I no longer carried any pre-conceived notions."

Yunus' experience reminds me of my own at the very same age. For him, as for me, an admission of "not knowing" and staying in the unknown, was the beginning of real learning. He had to set aside his need for approval (or even understanding from his academic peers). Dropping his preconceptions and leaving his theories in the classroom, Yunus traveled into the villages near Chittagong University. He decided that to understand poverty and hunger he had to learn a new economics by listening to poor people themselves.

What Yunus observed in these villages seems, in one sense, utterly obvious. Those most hungry are those with no land, but instead of accepting what he saw, Yunus asked: Why is it this way? Why can't it be different?

He found that many of the landless struggle for income by making things to sell. But they must buy the raw materials, and to do that they must borrow from a moneylender. By the time they repay the loan, plus interest (when Yunus began, interest could be as much as 10 percent, per day) what's left is never enough to live on.

Yunus' decision to stop, and then to listen with no preconceptions, led to a fundamental redirection of his life's path. Ultimately, it spurred a micro-credit bank, the Grameen Bank, to free poor people from debt bondage. It turned the "givens" of banking on their heads and successfully lent over \$3 billion to more than two million poor villagers in Bangladesh since the 1980s, mainly women. It sparked a movement that has now spread to 58 countries.

Four: We don't have to believe we can do it to do it; the very act of showing up, even with our fear, has power.

In an article my daughter recently published about her experience of working together, she quoted me. The scene was a rehearsal for our first joint lecture. It was no small start. We were about to face 2,500 people, with our image projected on a huge, full-stage screen, and the last speech Anna had given was at her high school graduation! So she recalled my saying: "Honey, you don't have to believe you can do it to do it."

"Oh," she probably thought. "My own self-doubt doesn't have to do me in. I can do it anyway." And she was a smash, invited back to the following year's conference to receive a leadership award.

My words to her popped out, no doubt, in part because my own experience of writing our book had taught me this lesson. Hope's Edge was my children's idea. They told me in no uncertain terms that it was time to return to my original intuition and "follow the food." But, my self doubts were gigantic.

I'd been focused on democracy in America for the last decade. Could I reconnect with the core food-and-hunger-thread of my life? When I was invited to MIT as a visiting scholar to write the book, my panic heightened: a new city where I knew virtually no one, a new institution.

Where would I even begin? Some days I could feel it as a tight throat. Others, as a tight chest. The worst were the dry-mouth days. Of course I would smile at faculty and students as I walked down the hall for coffee, but my insides were gripped by fear. Whenever I told friends that Anna and I were going to complete all the background research, travel to five continents for on-site research, collect and test recipes, and write the book --- all in one year, their heads shook in disbelief. There are just not that many hours in a day, their eyes seem to be saying to me.

But by early spring, I started noticing a strange phenomenon. Unexpected help just kept arriving.

On our first research trip to California, we sat in a tree-shaded outdoor café with Mollie Katzen, the pioneer whole-foods, vegetarian cookbook author and an old friend. Anna and I wanted her ideas for the book. Within minutes, though, Mollie said: "I want to help. What can I do?" Asking nothing at all in return, Mollie volunteered to oversee selection of recipes from among those donated by leading chefs and to oversee testing. I was dumbstruck; I knew that Mollie was pushing her own book deadline. Her generosity that day moved me almost to tears.

Soon after, a professor at the University of Wisconsin and a graduate student in his department of rural sociology volunteered to arrange what became dozens of interviews with farmers and others devoted to sustainable farming in the Madison area. Their assistance saved us weeks, maybe a month, of time and energy. Without them, I cannot now imagine how we could have completed our book.

Over and over it happened. Timing, people, coincidence all worked to transform the impossible into the possible.

I would laugh, and quote Woody Allen, or my mangled version of his wisdom: "Ninety percent of life is just showing up!" We showed up with all my fear and doubts. Then one door opened for us; then another, and another.

Finally a few months into the process, Anna looked at me and said: "Mom, I get the feeling this book wants to be born."

From our experience, I came to believe that our very act of showing up - even with one's fears - unleashing unseen forces. It creates space for others to come forward.

And that realization takes me to my final thought about fear.

Five. Transforming private fear is a public act.

My partner in speaking and writing about the role of fear in our lives is Jeff Perkins, the founder of curious minds, a Cambridge-based nonprofit. We met when he came to Vermont to work with the Center for Living Democracy, an organization I co-founded 12 years ago.

Jeff grew up in a small town, in rural New Hampshire. He is gay. As with many gay young people, he suffered intense fear at the thought of telling his parents. It was not until he was in his twenties and living in Cambridge, Jeff told me, that he came to realize he had no choice. He had to tell them, and live with the consequences, whatever they were.

He recalls the telephone call to his mother as the most difficult thing he'd ever done, with more tears than he'd ever shed.

Over time, Jeff's parents did come to accept this aspect of who Jeff is. In fact, it turned out that Jeff's mother had wanted as a young person to be active in causes she cared about. In her youth, it was the civil rights movement. But she held back because her parents feared for her safety. Witnessing her son's courage to be himself, a door opened for her, too. From having never been engaged in social action, she is now a state leader in the parents' organization supporting gay and lesbian young people. Jeff's mother was able to claim part of herself she'd shut down.

Being social creatures, we humans, of course we take our cues from each other. Every act in which we walk with fear, instead of believing we must run from it, makes space for others to do the same.

Concluding thoughts:

I would like to end my talk with one more story.

On our journey to write Hope's Edge, Anna and I visited the 4th largest city in Brazil, Belo Horizonte, for one reason. In 1993, the city government had declared food a right to citizenship. On the surface, Belo looks just like any other major industrial metropolis, with misery and riches living side by side.

But the decision to make food a right triggered dozens of innovations that have begun to end hunger in this city. A whole range of things: little patches of city-owned land were made available at low rent to local organic farmers as long as they would keep produce prices within the reach of poor, inner-city dwellers; the city redirected the 13 cents provided by the federal government for each school child's lunch and instead of buying corporate processed foods began buying local organic food and enhanced children's nutritional intake; to keep the market honest, the city teamed up with university researchers who posted the lowest prices of 45 basic food commodities at bus stops and broadcast them over radio. This way, inner city dwellers had sound information to fight against price gouging by unscrupulous grocers. With the new food-as-a-right of citizenship lens, the people began to see abundance where they had never seen it before: Manioc leaves and egg shells, always tossed out as waste, were processed into nutritious additive for bread for school kids. These were only a few of the initiatives that flowed as the city reached out to form alliances with citizen, religious and labor groups.

At the end of our stay in Belo, Anna and I sat with the Adriana Aranha, whose job in city government it was to coordinate all these efforts. I asked, "When you began, did you realize how important what you are doing was? How much difference it might make? Did you know rare it is in the entire world how out of step you were with the neo-Liberal approach that says government can do no good and the market can do no harm?"

Adriana goes on and on, animated and intense, in Portuguese. And of course we can't understand a word. We sit patiently, but then I see her eyes start to tear up. I can't wait anymore, so I nudge our interpreter. "Please, what is she saying?"

"I knew we were out of step," Adriana said. "I we had so much hunger in the world, but what is so upsetting, what I didn't know when I started this, is it's so easy. It's so easy to end it."

I've thought about this conversation many, many times since. Why was Adriana able to say "it's easy"?

I realize now that it is easy if we can take two steps: if we can see with new eyes as she and her colleagues had done with they declared food a right of citizenship; and if we can walk with our fear of being out of step, as they did as well. Then, it is easy.

And this thought brings me again to Paul Wellstone. In one of the most moving commentaries I've heard about Paul, it was noted that what was most striking about him was that he didn't complain as other senators did about the burdens of the job. Paul Wellstone loved his job, said the close observer, and added: What struck you was his joy.

A talk such as this one, centered on fear, might seem joyless. But I hope you feel just the opposite. For the truth is, as Adriana and Paul, show us, we discover joy as we realize that fear need not stop us. In his first campaign, Paul was out spent seven to one.

Fear -- walking with it, welcoming the possibility that it may be a signal that we are being true to ourselves -- becomes a pathway to joy.