

A WORLD OF FEAR

I like to scare people, and people like to be scared.

—STEPHEN KING

LOOK AT CHILDREN, see all humanity. Whereas adults cover up and hide, children are unadorned and open. They lack sophisticated facades and cultural trappings that quietly add layer upon layer to our adult experience. With children, you get the real thing.

Here is what you see.

Children are profoundly needy but stubbornly independent: “NO!” enters their vocabulary right after “Dada” or “Mama.”

They can be delightful and charming yet selfish and manipulative: “Mine!” comes right after “NO!”

When “Mine!” doesn’t work, they throw temper tantrums, and they do this without ever having witnessed adults banging their fists on the floor and screaming bloody murder. Children don’t have to learn anger.

Instead, anger can spring spontaneously from their already nascent minds.

They can tell lies, straight-faced, staring right at you, without blinking. Here again children need no teachers. They can lie without ever having been lied to.

And even if they live in an unassailable fortress, protected round the clock by loyalists who ward off all robbers, ghosts, and monsters, with loved ones always within calling distance, video cameras and alarms perpetually set, nightlights on before dusk, shielded from Stephen King, Walt Disney, Saturday morning cartoons, and all things creepy, they will—guaranteed—be afraid. Somehow, without anyone telling them, they know that they live in a world that isn't safe.

FEAR IN CHILDREN

One of the prized gifts of childhood is a grand imagination. Give a child any object and play happens. Dolls become treasured offspring; sticks transform into swords, guns, light sabers, and telescopes. The problem is that, coupled with a fearful heart, these wonderful imaginations can also envision the worst. Watch a child's imagination on the loose and you feel like you are watching an eight-year-old behind the wheel of an Indy race car. A dark room is all they need for their imagination to start careening out of control. Suddenly, clocks are watching them, as yet unclassified creatures scurry around inside the walls, and behind the closet door lurks a world of evil.

Consider Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes*. He is certain that as soon as his parents are out of sight and the lights are off, there is something drooling under his bed. At a moment's notice—just a flick of the switch—young Calvin goes from world-class superhero to the local under-the-bed monster's supper. And, no doubt, he speaks on behalf of his peers.

If children's imaginations don't take them to these scary places, bedtime stories will. Hansel and Gretel, Beauty and the Beast, *Things That Go*

Bump in the Night. Why are there so many scary stories for children? Yes, in classic fairy tales the good people prosper and justice wins in the end. But who is to say if we are good enough to identify with Cinderella? What if we aren't? And even if we think we might be spared the witch's oven, we have still discovered that there are horrible things out there.

Consider these excerpts from popular children's stories from around the world. Notice how they hint of bad things to come and partner with the anxieties of even the most secure child.

No one in the family ever went near the attic. They hoped the eerie sounds up there were made by branches scraping against the house. But they took no chances. And that was wise, for up in the attic an evil demonness awaited them.¹

Nothing subtle about this opening to a popular German children's story. The strange sounds present in every house have just been identified, and no sane child will ever go up *any* stairs without an exorcist or parent. Forget about even closing his eyes for the next week! The attic apparition has nothing to do but wait until the family sleeps.

Long ago in China there lived an old man with a heart of stone. He drove away every beggar who came to his door.²

This story starts off innocently enough. You might anticipate a morality tale about generosity. You aren't expecting the heebie-jeebies along the way. But this old man soon becomes a beggar himself. (Scary stories love symmetry.) And before he meets his end, which is assured, you will... not close your eyes for the next week.

Once upon a time there was a widow who had a daughter of her own and a stepdaughter. Whenever her own daughter said or did anything, the

woman would pat her on her head and say, “Clever girl!” But no matter how hard the stepdaughter tried, she was always being called “foolish” or “lazy” by the woman, who often scolded her and sometimes beat her.³

In this case you certainly don’t want to be the widow *or* her daughter. Their foolishness will be exposed, and then the axe will fall, perhaps literally. Meanwhile the stepdaughter, who (you *hope*) represents yourself, will marry someone rich and handsome.

Anya finally declared, “I am not afraid of anything!”⁴

This is a sure sign that in about three pages Anya will have the bejeebers scared out of her. Most likely she, too, will be dead in the end, and you will have the creeps. And notice the logic of the story. If you are *not* afraid, you are foolish and bad things happen. The only choice is, for our safety’s sake, to be filled with dread.

What is going on? These are stories you can find in every known culture. Maybe Stephen King is right—we like to scare and be scared. After all, who hasn’t enjoyed jumping out on an unsuspecting friend and saying, “BOO!”? And what American hasn’t voluntarily entered a fun house or actually paid money to be scared on an amusement ride? As long as we know that there is really nothing to be scared about, we like to be scared. The adrenaline makes us feel more vital. A good scare can beat an extra-large coffee.

But we are talking about young children here. They don’t yet take joy in scaring others or being scared (at least not until they are incited by mischievous siblings), and they don’t need the extra energy. What else is going on? Why do their imaginations go so quickly to scary things, even if they have no acquaintance with them? And why do they seem to *like* scary stories?

One possibility is that children are scared *before* they ever encounter their first scary story, in which case the function of the story is to validate pre-existing primal fears. In other words, children already feel as if there are

dangers lurking in every dark room. These fears came with the package of being human. The scary stories don't create fear; they simply offer explanations for it: "Yes, there are reasons why you are afraid. You feel *as if* there are monsters under the bed, and you are right. There really *are* monsters under the bed." Children might not be pleased to discover that the noise in the wall is a boogey man, but at least they have an explanation for their fear, and now they understand why they need a nightlight. (Monsters, of course, are strictly nocturnal.)

Fear is natural to us. We don't have to learn it. We experience fear and anxiety even before there is any logical reason for them. Children's fears predate their acquaintance with scary stories.⁵

FEAR IN TEENS

When children become teens, they take their scary stories with them, but these fortified stories are no longer cute. Gone are the good fairies and kind strangers with unusual powers. Now it is just in-your-face horror: *Goosebumps*, Freddy Krueger, Chuckie, and chainsaws.

A few teens—maybe two or three—refuse to watch these movies. They already have plenty of fears. Why add to them? The rest seem to *need* these nightmarish tales. For some, fear makes them feel alive. It functions in the same way as extreme amusement rides. The guys laugh and the girls scream, which is one reason the guys laugh. But the horror genre serves more purposes than an adrenaline rush or getting a date to hold onto you during an especially chilling scene. These stories say, "It is isn't safe out there! Something is watching!" And, they are more accurate than they know. Being good, which was your protection in the children's stories, doesn't seem to matter now. Whatever is lurking out there seems incapable of judging between who has been naughty and who has been nice. It has no prejudices or preferences. Teens are not so naïve as to think that their own good deeds will somehow protect them.

Maybe teenagers will be protected if they act out their fears. At least that seems to be the logic behind Halloween. How many emotions have their own national holidays? All around the world there are variations of Halloween. People dress up and do something either to scare off or to make peace with the spirits that allegedly walk among us. In the United States, as secular and scientific as we think we are, the spiritual overtones of Halloween are right on the surface. The costumes are increasingly macabre. A quick walk down the street and you see zombies, mutilated bodies, devils, and your walking nightmares. The costumes are not exclusively ghoulish; there are adorable angels galore. But the angels have a purpose. Angels are spiritual beings, sent from God to protect us. They are part of the supernatural ethos of the evening. Fear is, indeed, a spiritual matter.

FEAR IN ADULTS

As adulthood nudges its way into our lives, one would assume we would put away childish fears and anxieties. But have we? Though adults might not go door-to-door to ask for candy, more dress up for Halloween and Mardi Gras events than ever before. Prime-time television programs feature vampires, mediums, ghosts, and other visitors from the afterlife. The murder mystery is requisite beach reading. Adult horror stories take our senses to the limit. The evening news continues to be a horror reality show. Although there are occasional attempts at positive news, no one tunes in if the news gets too warm and fuzzy. As a culture, young and old, we are groping for a venue to portray the unreasonable, mysterious, risky, and downright scary essence of daily life.

Our cities have random shootings and the threat of *jihad* adds to our anxieties. It would seem that increased freedom would help, but it doesn't. Both oppression and freedom can incite fear. Freedom resolves the fear and anxiety associated with persecution and oppression, but it increases the fear of personal failure, which is one reason Soren Kierkegaard said that anxiety

is the dizziness of freedom. With freedom come more choices, which mean more opportunities to get it wrong. Freedom or oppression—pick your poison. They both contribute to our fears and anxieties.

In short, nothing happens to assuage our fears when we turn twenty, and much in our society assumes that fact. Politicians, for example, count on them. It is axiomatic that the candidate who taps into our fears is the one who wins. Once it was the Communist menace. Now politicians predict fiscal catastrophe or increased terrorism or WMDs—unless, of course, they are elected.

All this happens in countries where there is relative peace and prosperity. How much more intense fear must be in less stable regions! Consider those living in the Sudan, where Omar al-Bashir's campaign of ethnic and religious persecution killed over 180,000 in two years. Over two million were driven from their homes; the burning of villages lessened only because there were so few villages left to burn. Such oppression breeds paralytic fear.

As we might guess, far from gradually becoming extinct in adulthood, our fears increase throughout our lives. What was once a small family of worries quietly conducts an aggressive breeding program to become a teeming community of palpable fears and private anxieties. The code by which fear and anxiety live is primal: multiply. As we possess more things, care about more people, accumulate more bad experiences, and watch *Fear Factor* and the evening news, it is as if we absorb fear. If they are not obvious in your own life, perhaps it's because you have been living in a war zone your entire life. At first you noticed every gunshot. After a while the mayhem blends in with the rustle of the trees, the TV, and the children playing in the other room. Fear gradually became the background noise of everyday life.

Yet it doesn't take much for that background noise to jump to the forefront of our attention. When the town fathers in Sarasota, Florida, announced a proposal to place a few life-like clowns around town, subterranean fears erupted.

When coulrophobes [those who fear clowns] there learned that city officials were about to approve a plan to put 70 life-size fiberglass clowns in the downtown area, they inundated agencies with calls, e-mails, and in-person protests.⁶

The proposal went down in flames because one in seven of us is a certifiable coulrophobe.

Ask a friend if he or she has a particular phobia and your own fears won't seem quite as silly. There are names for literally thousands of fears.

Have you ever read a book or seen a movie about submarines? Stories such as Alistair MacLean's *Ice Station Zebra* are scary stories for adults because they arouse our claustrophobia, fears of suffocation, and fears of being buried alive. The submarine doubles as a coffin. The children's writer, Hans Christian Anderson, always afraid he would be buried alive. His practice was to leave a note on his bedside table explaining that he may "seem dead" but that he was merely sleeping.

There was a time when adults were neatly categorized into one of two groups: you were either neurotic or psychotic. Psychotic meant that you were out of touch with reality and afraid; neurotic meant that you were *in* touch with reality and afraid. Today we are much more enlightened and offer many more diagnostic possibilities. There are scores of psychiatric disorders from which we can select. Yet by far the largest category remains fear. Notice how fear and anxiety are central to this list of modern psychopathologies.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Generalized anxiety disorder | Panic disorder |
| Agoraphobia | Paranoid schizophrenia |
| Social phobia | Other specific phobias |
| Obsessive-compulsive disorder | Post-traumatic stress disorder |
| Sexual aversion disorder | Nightmare disorder |
| Sleep terror disorder | Paranoid personality |
| Avoidant personality | Separation anxiety disorder |
| Persecutory delusions | |

About one in ten experiences more extreme versions of these problems. But if we look closely at ourselves, we will notice something in every description that feels familiar.

Obsessive-compulsive Disorder (OCD), in its pronounced form, affects about one in fifty people. It is worry run amok. The obsession is an intrusive idea that feels impossible to dislodge. The compulsion is the action intended to neutralize the obsession. In its less disruptive form it is fairly common: most people think about germs and contamination, and it's not unusual to triple-check the alarm and double-check the stove. But it can become life-dominating. The obsession of germs can lead to the compulsion of endless hand-washing that leaves the skin bleeding and sore. The imaginary fear that you might have witnessed or caused an accident keeps you circling back to the side of the road where you think it all happened. You check the scene until the compulsion is dislodged by another. Religious doubts and fears are handled by repetitive counting. Hours of each day are filled with rituals that hopefully will nullify those fears.

One in fifty is the statistic for the more severe form of OCD, but traces of it can be found everywhere. Worries come to us covered in sticky paper; they aren't shaken off easily.

Panic is another common form of fear and anxiety. It is fear that utterly explodes in physical symptoms: heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, shaking, fear of dying, fear of going crazy. After the initial episode, we add the fear that it could happen again, which makes it all the more likely that it will.

There are, of course, treatments for fears and anxieties. Medication dulls the physical symptoms; psychological treatments address the thoughts. If you are afraid to fly because you keep thinking the plane will crash, you can replace that thought with another. *I've flown many times before and nothing has happened. It's the safest way to travel.* This might help, but it rests on the premise that fear submits to logic, which is a dubious assumption. In reality, fears are rarely logical. Or, as fearful people might protest, they are *very*

logical. If the statistics on plane crashes indicate that they are extremely rare, the statistics also say that planes *do* crash and people actually die in plane crashes. *Someone* is going to be that 1 in 100,000; and you aren't feeling very lucky. You have a foreboding sense that the odds are against you.

Other treatments, such as *systematic desensitization*, focus on the body's response to fear. The goal is to teach your body how to relax as a way to distract a mind locked into a potential catastrophe. After you learn to physically relax, you then either imagine or actually face a series of lesser fears while you maintain physical calm. Once you master those, you graduate to the greater fears. You might be encouraged to add a pleasant mental image to your bodily relaxation. Tropical islands are popular. The basic idea is that you can't multi-task. If you are thinking about balmy breezes on a perfect beach, your mind won't have room for your fears.

These versions of fool-your-body-into-thinking-everything-is-okay can help some people cross bridges or even fly; but, when examined closely, they seem superficial and thus rather hopeless. They reduce fear to a series of physiological responses. Meanwhile we suspect that there is a deeper reality to our fears and worries. Listen to your fears and you hear them speak about things that have personal meaning to you. They appear to be attached to things we value.

One of the things we value is life, so it isn't surprising that death hovers right below the surface of many fears. Neither thought control nor physical relaxation can ward off this monster. If we want fear to loosen its grip, we have to deal with death head on. Bridges, planes and many other fears are the fear of death in disguise. Given such a potent adversary, we can't simply gloss over it with mental trips to Tahiti unless we have already decided that there are no answers and denial is our only hope.

These deeper meanings in our fears suggest that we will have to look in two directions. As we look outward, we will see real dangers: disease, death, war, economic collapse, and a host of other ills. That, however, is only part of the story. Why do we all have different *responses* to possible dangers?

And why are some people petrified of some things, such as mice, that aren't dangerous?

To deeply understand fear we must also look at ourselves and the way we interpret our situations. Those scary objects can reveal what we cherish. They point out our insatiable quest for control, our sense of aloneness. Even the vocabulary of fear indicates that the problem can be deeper than a real, objective danger. While “fear” refers to the experience when a car races toward us and we just barely escape, “anxiety” or worry is the lingering sense, after the car has passed, that life is fragile and we are always vulnerable.

The terrain is fear and anxiety. You are familiar with it, and you are not alone.