Fearless

I used to be afraid a lot. Many of my childhood memories consist of days spent in a perpetual state of worry over one thing or another. I dreaded going to the dentist and going to get vaccinated. I wouldn't talk to the girl I liked in my class because I was scared the other kids would find out I liked her and tease me. I'd come home from school alone and stalk around the empty house looking for intruders, scared and yelling in my most intimidating ten-year-old voice. As a teenager, I was scared I'd get laughed at in gym class because I didn't look as manly as some of the older guys. Wherever there was a possibility of something unpleasant happening, I was there, worrying about it – often many days in advance.

I felt guilty. If there was a chance I might have hurt someone or misrepresented the facts even slightly in something I'd said, it would eat me alive. I wouldn't cross the street anywhere but a crosswalk, even if all my friends did, because my parents had told me not to and I knew how badly I would feel about going against their wishes.

I never skipped class. Not even once until my junior year of high school. It was like the possibility didn't even exist in my head. I didn't smoke or drink in secret. I had to get the right grades, I had to get into the right school, I had to… because if I didn't, then… then what? I didn't even dare think about it, but surely something unfathomably horrible would happen and everything would be completely miserable forever.

After graduation, I went into business for myself. It consumed my whole life. I had to make money, because without lots and lots of money, I was sure I'd never have the kind of life I wanted. I wasn't happy, and as far as I was concerned, I would never be happy until I was rich. I hated the work I forced myself to do, but the fear of what kind of life I would have to face if I didn't make money spurred me on like a slave driver. I thought of it as "determination" at the time, but it was fear. I wasn't so much running towards where I wanted to be as I was running away from where I was.

I wasn't alone.

Fear is the primary motivator of human action. Of all the choices made and all the behaviors exhibited by all the people in the world, most come about because of fear. Most people live in some degree of fear all the time, and most of the rest live in fear some of the time. Fear becomes such a natural part of your existence that you don't even reflect over it. You call it "stress" or "work pressure" or maybe you don't call it anything at all. You just "feel tense" all the time. You might not even think about it consciously, but it is always there, putting a dampener on your experience of the world. If you're lucky, you have a moment now and then when you're lying on the beach or playing with your kids or having sex and you forget about the fear for a few seconds and really feel alive. The stars shine a little brighter, the grass looks a little greener, the birds sing a little louder and you just feel good for no explicable reason. The fear has loosened its grip for a moment, and you wish you could stay this way forever.

But the fear comes back. You've got bills to pay, a schedule to keep, maybe a family or at least yourself to provide for. If you don't pay the bills or don't make the meeting, you'll lose your electricity and you'll lose your job and eventually you'll die. The fear keeps you

going, lets you believe that spending all day doing things you don't like to do is a sacrifice worth making to keep running away from something even worse. You have to buy insurance, because what if something happens? You have to keep track of your doctors' checkups and remember to go regularly, because what if there's a hidden cancer growing inside of you? You have to be suspicious of people passing in the street, because what if they want to hurt you? What if? What if? What if? What if you never get that thing that you want, what if something bad happens, what if you die before you've done everything you wanted to do, what if the future brings something worse than the present?

What then? Then you'll wish you'd spent this time being right here and enjoying what you have now, rather than being in the future in your mind, worrying about something that doesn't exist yet, neglecting to experience what is happening at this moment. Fear takes you away from the present moment, takes you away from experience. You have a limited capacity for how much you can experience at once. The more you are experiencing fear and its variations – worry, stress, uncertainty about the future, feelings of insecurity – the less you are able to experience life. People who have near-death experiences often become incredibly happy for a while afterwards. For as long as you're still trying to wrap your head around how amazingly lucky it is that you didn't just die, the fear is gone.

You aren't worrying about the bills. You aren't scared of your boss. You aren't insecure about that girl who might or might not like you. You aren't thinking about things that could go wrong, you're just thinking about the thing that didn't go wrong. You expected to die, you expected that there would be no bills, no boss, no girl, no future at all for you. You didn't worry about any of that, your only fear was the fear of imminent death, and now that you avoided that fate and that fear went away, there is a void left in your mind.

There is no fear.

That's why you feel so alive. That's why everything has such a wonderful quality about it that you never noticed before. The city lights are beautiful, the rain smells incredible, and you feel filled with love for every stranger on the street. It's like everything in the world has gained a new dimension of depth where you only saw the surface before. It was always there, but your mind was so occupied with fear that there simply wasn't room to take in all the input from your senses. You saw the city, but you didn't *really* see it. You felt your body move as you walked, but you didn't *really* feel it. It's like you've been watching your life on a VHS tape on a crappy old TV all your life and gotten used to that being "normal", and now you're suddenly watching a DVD or Blu-ray with five-speaker surround sound and you just *can't believe how awesome* everything looks and sounds.

As the fear comes back, the colors will fade and the quality of your experience will decrease again. The signals coming in through your senses will become warped as they mix with the signal of fear coming from inside your mind. You wish that didn't have to happen. You wish you could stay like this, even just for a little while. You would give anything to stay like this. You would die to stay like this. One day like this is worth at least ten regular days.

And that's the thing, that's the key. You're used to needing the fear to keep you alive, but now you realize that a day without fear is worth many days lived in fear. Fear may keep you alive a little longer, but that life will be of much lower quality. If you let go of all the fear today, you might die sooner, but you would get much more enjoyment out of that time, probably more than out of a long life lived in fear.

How useful is fear anyway? How important is it for staying alive? How much do you think your risk of death would increase if you quit worrying? You wouldn't be quite as alert and jumpy in situations where accidents might happen, you wouldn't be as careful about pissing people off, and you might not show up to every meeting on time, but overall, the risk of death wouldn't increase by a whole lot. Certainly not by as much as your enjoyment of life would.

The way I figure it, it's pretty hard to imagine my risk of death or other seriously harmful consequences increasing more than twofold as a result of not worrying. Even that seems to me like a very high estimate. I know for a fact that my enjoyment of life increases by a factor much greater than that — I would say it's a factor of at least five or ten, maybe more. It's hard to really quantify the difference between "everything is wonderful" and "everything is not wonderful". Maybe one fearless day is worth more than a lifetime of being afraid.

Bad things have happened to me, and will most likely continue to, on occasion, and one day I'll die. Situations arise now and then that cause my body to produce that physical emergency response that prepares it chemically to fight or flee, but I don't carry it around with me once the moment has passed. If you ask me what my greatest fear is, I'll have trouble coming up with an answer. I want to say I'm not scared of anything at all. Maybe if I found myself in a life-threatening situation, I'd feel the fear, but I make a conscious effort not to carry fear around with me. I'm not quite perfect at it, but I get better every day. I don't know if I really have the kind of feeling about anything that people would generally consider intense enough to call "being scared". Looking back at the kind of fears I used to carry around as a kid, I'm not sure I would either. I might say I'm "slightly concerned" about a couple of things, and I'm working on making those concerns go away as well.

The more aware I can be of fear-based feelings when they arise and the more I consciously make an effort to always be dismissing them, the more my world gains color and depth. I don't feel like I need a lot of things anymore, what's around me is pretty amazing by itself and I can be quite happy with it. The best thing I can do to improve my life is to avoid immersing myself in mental projection of possible futures.

Just to be in the present moment, experiencing the feelings of being alive.

Fearless.

"Why Do You Help People?"

August 2 2011

I haven't posted many reader emails lately, but this one I thought you should see. It's from a 16-year-old guy I'm going to call Desmond to protect his privacy:

Why do you help people? How do I get my mind working for me?

(Please, use my email if you find it useful but don't include any personal info!)