

How We Lead

Monthly musings for change agents in business and society
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Curious Leader at the Movies: Leading with Fear

It has long been fashionable to say that the world is a scary place. In other words, bad things can happen to good people in any place at any time for no apparent reason. After the September 11 tragedy, many people began to say that the United States is also a scary place. In short: these bad things can happen to me...here...now.

That is one perspective. Another is that the fear many of us have felt since September 11 is not new. It is a more powerful form of a long-held fear that goes like this: "Someone is out to get me." Or, just as commonly: "Someone is out to get us." The "us" could be my family, my loved ones, or my tribe. Recall the collective feeling after the Oklahoma City bombing or during the string of school shootings in the middle and late 1990s. During both experiences, many Americans realized that the places they considered safe are not so safe after all.

One advocate for this second perspective is the filmmaker Michael Moore. His latest creation, *Bowling for Columbine*, explores the topic of fear as the subtext of a broader inquiry into American gun violence. As in his earlier film "Roger and Me", Moore approaches his subject with a deft blend of curiosity and humor. To understand the stance he takes, imagine waking up one morning and finding a giraffe in your living room. You might wonder: How did this get here? Or: Why my living room and not my neighbor's? This is precisely the way Moore invites us to consider gun violence in the United States. Not to assume we understand it, but to inquire into its origins by poking around people's offices, homes, and minds.

The film's focus: why are so many American killed by guns every year? It is not a trivial question if one believes the statistics Moore cites. In one recent year, 68 people died in the United Kingdom from guns, 381 in Germany, and 39 in Japan. The total in the United States: over 11,000. These are stunning differences, and population size accounts for only a fraction of them. What, Moore wonders aloud, is so unusual about Americans?

Rather than propose an answer at the outset, Moore peels away at the question layer by layer. He begins with a commonly cited view: Americans kill each other because they have more access to guns. Is this the reason? Nope, he

suggests. Just look at the Canadians. They own as many guns yet rarely use them to kill each other. Second take: What about the images of violence in movies and music? Are these the culprits? Again the answer is no, and again he points to American's peaceful northern neighbor as evidence. Canadians watch the same music and listen to the same movies, and they also get agitated. But they don't shoot each other. OK, door number three: Is it that the United States has a more violent past than other countries? Moore finds this view equally dubious. England and Germany have bloody pasts yet have much lower incidences of gun deaths. Clearly something else must be at work. What is it?

Moore never offers a clear-cut answer. Instead, he challenges us through images and metaphors to take seriously two possibilities:

1. People shoot each other when they are afraid. Gun possession plus fear equals trigger-happy. Americans feel more fear than do residents of other countries. So they shoot.
2. Individuals are more prone to violence when their country is more prone to violence. If the United States is unhappy with other another country – say, Libya, Serbia or Iraq - it drops bombs. Americans know this, feel this, and therefore imitate it in their own lives.

These are provocative ideas. We could argue about them for hours. Many of us already have.

I'm not interested in doing this here.

Instead, let's take one of these ideas – the presence of fear in our lives– and examine it more closely. Moore has given us a gift by raising the issue, yet his treatment of it barely scratches the surface. (This is perfectly understandable, because the film's focus is gun violence, not fear.) It is up to us to explore it more deeply by considering the multiple variations of fear and more broadly by wondering how it shows up not only in gun violence but also in all parts of our lives, including our work in organizations.

We can do this by asking four questions:

1. Why does fear matter?
2. Where does fear live?
3. What are the different types of fear?
4. How does it feel to lead with fear?

Why does fear matter?

This is an existential question. By raising it, we are really wondering: Why does it make a difference that there is fear in the world rather than no fear? Some of us would be tempted to answer this question the way we imagine an existential philosopher would: by arguing in abstract terms using obscure language. This sounds boring to me. It also is not how a good existentialist would respond. A

good existentialist is concerned with how things actually show up in life, how they *exist* in the everyday world. Let us then ask: how does fear show up in our lives?

You may be expecting my bullet point list of answers. Don't worry – that is coming. But first, why not ask the question of yourself: “How does fear show up in my life?”

Pause...This is where you stop and reflect. Consider your life over the past week...When do you recall feeling fear? What were the situations?

Now, my answers:

- Last week I coached a consultant named Elizabeth (not her real name). She is moving to Europe. She is excited yet wonders whether she will be able to learn the new language quickly enough to connect with people, make friends and generate business. These thoughts distract her from the work she is doing now. Fear is present.
- I meet a woman at a party. We dance and talk. At the end, I get her phone number. Two days later, as I prepare to call her, my stomach tightens, my breath shortens, and I notice dryness in my throat. Fear is present.
- A widely noted scene in *Bowling for Columbine*: Michael Moore has talked his way into Charlton Heston's house for an interview. The conversation is amicable until Moore asks Heston why he agreed to speak at a pro-gun rally in Flint only 48 hours after a 6-year-old boy there had shot a classmate to death. Heston freezes. His face turns white. He stands up and walks away. We've barely gotten to hear from Heston, and already the interview is over. Fear is present.

Fear is present more often than we imagine. It affects our happiness, our effectiveness, and our health.

But how do we recognize it? We can begin by asking a most unusual question:

Where does fear live?

This sounds like the kind of question a four-year-old would ask. Perhaps some do, but my hunch is that most are more concerned with where monsters live. (At age four, I was certain that monsters lived in the closet and under the bed. Oddly enough, these were also the places I chose to hide when I imagined that a human intruder had entered the house.) In contrast, adults rarely ponder this one. I find this unfortunate, because it is difficult to relate more skillfully to something we cannot locate. Imagine putting on gloves without knowing where your hands are. Or planting a garden without knowing where the sidewalk ends and the dirt begins. Few of us try these things, because we know what would happen. We'd end up with gloves on our ears and tulips growing through the kitchen floor. Yet we do precisely this with fear. We try to do something with it (fight it, kill it, hide from it, overpower it) without knowing where it lives.

So, then, where does fear live? I think that it lives primarily in our bodies. In the way we hold our bodies when we sit, stand and walk (a.k.a. our postures). In the habitual movements we make, like crossing our hands over our chests, blinking, biting our lips, or waving our arms in certain patterns. And in the sensations present in our bodies, like moist palms or the constriction of leg muscles. These are a few examples. There are many others. Each of us has our own. For me, fear often lives as shallow breath and a tight stomach.

When I say that fear “lives,” I’m not referring to a brief cameo appearance. Think instead of the musical *Cats* on Broadway, Madonna on the pop charts, or Strom Thurmond in the U.S. Senate. All showed up and then stayed. Fear is the same way. Once it enters our bodies – which is always at a very early age – it tends to hang out for a while... like decades. My stomach isn’t just tight when someone is threatening me or even when I’m doing something that seems risky. It is tight at many others times, too. Not because I want it to be. Not because it needs to be. But because that is where fear lives.

The good news is that once we know where fear lives, we can do something about it. What many of us want to do with fear is smother it, kill it, or run away from it. These are all viable options. There is only one problem: fear lives in our bodies. So if we smother fear, we are smothering our bodies. If we kill fear, we are killing our bodies. And if we are run away from fear, we are running way from our bodies. Indeed, this is precisely what many of us are doing at this very moment. For example, do you know where your feet are right now? How is your breathing? What is your posture like? (Yes, I know: it is terribly rude to ask such questions while you’re reading. But I’m trying to make a point here, and I need your participation.)

I advocate for another way of dealing with fear. Rather than battling it or fleeing from it, I suggest we do the unthinkable and actually feel it. Really feel the sensations in the legs or stomach. Feel our muscles and joints in the posture they are now in. Feel the habitual ways we furrow our brows or cross our arms.

When we do this, when we actually feel fear, we realize that it’s nothing more than a set of sensations in our bodies. These may be powerful sensations. These may be overwhelming sensations. But they are only sensations. And as such, we can do something about them: notice them, learn from them, and even witness them transform.

Another thing happens when we start to notice where fear resides: we realize that it does not show up the same way each time. Sometimes it feels one way. Other times it feels differently. We begin to wonder: is all fear the same? Or are there different forms of fear? If the latter, then it is not long before we ask:

What are the different types of fear?

I remember once asking a similar question about dress shoes: Is there really more than one kind of dress shoe? I didn't realize the sheer number of variations until I took a job in the men's shoes department at Nordstrom. I learned that there are square toes and cap toes, laced and unlaced, and even different types of soles. These distinctions opened up the world of dress shoes for me. It helped me not only buy a few new pairs for myself but also recognize the many variations on other people's feet.

We can do the same thing with fear. Discovering new distinctions makes it easier to recognize the variations of fear. And therefore open possibilities in how we respond to it.

A great source for these distinctions is Robert Solomon's book *The Passions*. Solomon describes in rich detail the different moods that human beings experience. For Solomon, a mood is not just some mushy amorphous thing. It is a judgment we make about the future that powerfully influences how we act in the world. Resentment, resignation, joy, and hope are all moods. So is fear. Actually, fear can be divided into several different moods:

- Anguish. This is fear directed inward. I imagine myself doing something harmful. The scope can be very precise (e.g. fear of making an error in an important meeting, hitting my head on the diving board, or expressing my anger by punching my boss) or broad (a general fear of doing something bad). When I feel anguish, I distrust myself and therefore make myself powerless. I avoid the meeting, choose not to dive, and push away the anger when around my boss.
- Anxiety. This is fear directed outward with a cosmic scope. It is not that I am afraid of some things and not others. Instead, I am afraid of everything. My desire is to hide from everything. I do this by making myself completely powerless.
- Fear. In its simplest form, this is directed outward at a particular person, object or event. I fear being ostracized by my peers, losing my job, receiving a letter filled with anthrax, or having my child kidnapped and tortured. My desire is not (as with anxiety) to go into hiding, but to run away. I stay in motion, doing what I do, but with little confidence of staying safe.
- Despair. This is fear directed outward but with reference to one's own action. The scope is large and related to some core aspect of one's life. I long to be a writer (or an astronaut or a professional tennis player), but I know this is absolutely impossible, so I don't bother to try. Despair absolves me of responsibility for my future and allows me to attract other's sympathy.

Do you see why knowledge of these distinctions might be useful? The major reason is that it allows us to name what's happening in the present moment. In the week following September 11, I was so terrified of everything that I barely left

my apartment. Sure, I had particular fears of airplanes crashing into downtown buildings, but most of my fear was more cosmic than this. Just the idea of walking down the street sent me scurrying back to bed. This was very different from my client's anguish about not being able to learn a new language fast enough to connect with people. Although this made it more challenging for her to feel joyful in her final weeks in the country, it did not keep her from leaving the house and going about her work.

The other reason these distinctions are relevant? When coupled with an awareness of our bodies, they help us recognize the best ways of dealing with fear. Lately, I've been experimenting with an approach that seems counterintuitive to most: leading with fear. By this, I don't mean leading with the intention to scares others, but leading with full acceptance that fear is present here...now...in my body.

How does it feel to lead with fear?

You've caught on by now that I'm not in favor of either fighting fear or avoiding it. What you may not know is how many years I have tried these approaches. And how fruitless I have found them to be. Maybe you've discovered the same thing: when we place ourselves into opposition to any feeling, we cut off a part of ourselves. And this hurts.

So I'd like to propose an alternative. I call it "leading with fear." This means acting in the world with full knowledge of the fear (or anguish, anxiety or despair) in our bodies. Indeed, not only acting with this recognition, but leading with it. In our families. In our organizations. And in our communities.

I don't know exactly how to do this, but I have a couple of ideas. The first, as we have seen, is to fully feel the sensations in our bodies. This means bringing our attention to them, naming them, and then allowing our breath to move right through them. When my neck is tight, I have the thought "tight neck" and then focus on breathing through it. When my legs feel constricted, I bring this constriction into my attention and imagine myself breathing through my legs.

The second is a bit harder to conceptualize, but equally powerful. This is to love right through the fear. I learned this from David Deida, who writes about spirituality and sex. Loving through fear means recognizing that we are much larger than our fears, much larger than our body sensations and feelings. It means discovering our own spaciousness. With an intimate partner, we become spacious when we feel the power of our love in our hearts and through our breath. In organizations, we become spacious when we feel our calling, our sense of purpose, with every cell in our bodies. In both cases, our spacious selves are literally bigger than our normal selves. The fear is there just as before, but now we have expanded ourselves such that we can hold the fear

without being dominated by it. On an energetic level, we can love right through the fear.

It's just like hanging out with a bull. If you knew that the bull would always be in the room with you – that this was an unavoidable fact of your life - where would you rather be: in your living room or Madison Square Garden? Most of us would prefer Madison Square Garden, because it is large enough for the bull to coexist with us. Why not treat fear the same way?

When we breathe through fear and recognize our own spaciousness, new possibilities open up in our lives. Consider a few recent examples from my life. (Several readers have told me I write more about suffering than joy. This section is dedicated to you.)

- Ten minutes into a talk, I am still finding my voice. The sense of doom lingers over me as I imagine how, any minute, someone is going to tell me what I'm saying is worthless and drag me away from the microphone. My hands are sweating. My neck is tight. I notice these things, pause, and realize, "Hey, you've been here before. You know what to do." I feel my feet on the floor, notice how the earth supports me, and allow my breath to deepen. Gradually my body relaxes. My ears catch the sound of my own voice, the murmur of people chatting in the back, and the honking of a car horn outside. As the object of my hearing expands, I also start to notice new things with my eyes. Two people in the audience listening with rapt attention. A woman smiling about something I have said. I realize for the first time that I am connected to people, and they are connected to me. Above all, I feel safe. The people here are my colleagues, my fellow travelers. They want me to speak what matters, to let it all hang out. As these thoughts flash through my mind, my body feels light, my muscles relax, and my voice is clear and powerful. As the words pour out, nothing matters to me other than what is happening in this moment. Who I am and what I am doing are in full alignment.
- It is midnight, and I am halfway through the first draft of a paper on leadership development and sustainable business. Many other things are happening in the world right now. A car pulls out of the driveway next door. A television set across the street reports on events in Afghanistan. My own stomach begins to grumble for a late night snack. These things happen, and I notice them, but they do not capture me. All my attention is focused on the ideas in my mind and the computer screen in front of me. There is nothing more important than writing this paper. And so I do.
- My brother and I sit on the couch in his apartment in Boulder. Music plays softly in the background. After talking for a few minutes, I want to tell him about a recent dating experience and what I learned from it. I notice myself thinking, "We don't talk about these things together." This is true. In the twenty-one years we have been brothers, we have never discussed dating, sex or relationships. I notice my stomach is tight. I take a couple of deep breaths and then tell the story. To my surprise, he is intrigued and delighted.

He responds by telling me about some of his own experiences. As I look in his eyes, as I hear myself saying things to him I've never said before, the place in my chest where my heart resides warms. I feel free with him like I've never felt before. There is a new openness between us. We're at different places in our lives, yet there is unmistakable resonance between our experiences. I feel enlivened by the sense of kinship. I feel grateful to be his brother.

These are powerful moments in my life. When my actions align with my life purpose, when I feel truly connected to another person, the being known as Amiel is suddenly larger. Who I am becomes more than my everyday petty concerns and self-protective moves. It becomes infinitely larger. And so the fear, while no smaller in an absolute sense, shrinks in its relative importance. I am not free from fear. I am free with fear. And to the extent that my actions constitute leadership, I am leading with fear.

This is not hocus pocus, nor is it a possibility limited to me. We all have the potential to lead with fear. And we can do this by noticing where fear lives in our bodies and then recognizing our inherent spaciousness. Becoming competent at this does not happen overnight, but with practice it is possible. The good news (which doubles as the bad news)? We don't have to seek out this practice. The opportunities are right here before us every day. And I'm talking about times of relative peace. Add in a war with Iraq and acts of terrorism on a grander scale than September 11, and practice may be all that we have.

May you lead with fear. And may others learn from your example.

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