

The following is the first chapter from Thom Rutledge's book, Embracing Fear: How to Turn What Scares Us Into Our Greatest Gift (HarperSanFrancisco). To learn more about the book and about Thom's work, visit www.ThomRutledge.com.

Chapter One: Don't Run, Don't Hide *The Power of Fear*

There is only one freedom: the freedom from fear.
Oriah Mountain Dreamer

We all know fear. I'm not talking just about the big fears --- terror and panic --- but fear in all its variations. Fear is our constant companion, our day to day nemesis, and our ultimate challenge.

Fear fuels our negative and judgmental thoughts and our need to control things. Fear underlies guilt and shame and anger. Every difficult emotion we experience represents some kind of threat --- a threat to our self-esteem, or to the stability of a relationship (personal or professional), even to our right to be alive. And threat translates to fear. Start with any difficult emotion you choose, get on the elevator, press B for basement, and there, below the guilt and shame and anger, below the negativity and the judgments, you will find it: fear.

Fear hides inside seemingly less severe words such as anxiety, worry, and nervousness. It ranges from anxiety about giving a presentation at work to anxiety about the presence of terrorism in our world. It ranges from worry that our shoes don't match an outfit to worry about world hunger. It ranges from being nervous to perform at a recital to being nervous about the results of an AID's test.

Fear is a major influence in every one of our lives, but not always to the negative. As we will discuss at length, fear is essentially a positive mechanism, an ingenious natural design to keep us safe. And there are plenty of opportunities for that healthy fear to work its magic, guiding us this way and that, alerting us to danger and aligning us with what is good and right with the world.

But our big human brains have created a spin off design. The new design is a fear we can self-impose without need of external intervention. “No thank you,” we say. “I don’t need any real danger to activate my fear. I can do it perfectly well myself.” Or we can take any legitimate fear and work with it until we are paralyzed, barely able to get a decent breath. What an excellent job we do wasting our valuable mental energy like this.

This book takes its name from a speech given to the United States Congress by Franklin Delano Roosevelt on January 6, 1941, at a time in history when considerable legitimate fear was in the air. The Second World War was brewing, but the United States had not yet joined the fight; the Japanese would not attack Pearl Harbor for another eleven months. President Roosevelt spoke with courage about protecting lives and a way of life. He said ...

“In future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

“The first is freedom of speech and expression --- everywhere in the world.

“The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way --- everywhere in the world.

“The third is freedom from want --- which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants --- everywhere in the world.

“The fourth is freedom from fear --- which, translated into world terms, means a worldwide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor --- anywhere in the world.”

(FDR, 1941)

President Roosevelt also said that a world based on these four freedoms was “no vision of a distant millennium,” but “a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation.”

In the sixty years since the Four Freedoms speech, we have experienced times of relative peace, mostly continuing conflict and political turbulence, and we have experienced dangers beyond what Mr. Roosevelt could have imagined. It would never have occurred to him, for instance, that there would be a time when a small knife or box-cutter in the hands of a terrorist would be enough armament to transform a domestic airliner into a deadly guided missile.

Unfortunately we have not manifested the world of freedoms President Roosevelt envisioned, and as we stand in that distant millennium, we long for such a world perhaps more than ever. The countless political explanations for this are beyond the scope of my expertise and of this book, but as a psychotherapist I do believe that I have something to contribute here, something to say about how we might still rationally hope to live in a world free of fear.

When Franklin Roosevelt delineated the four freedoms, the fourth being the freedom from fear, he was specifically referring to our right to live without fear of external threat of war and destruction. My work as a psychotherapist has been largely about how to claim our right to live without fear of internal war and destruction. I have spent thousands of hours in conversation with people --- individually and in groups --- working to increase understanding and to solve problems. I couldn't possibly recall all of the various strategies, techniques and philosophies I have enlisted toward these ends, but I can report that no matter what the approach, every single difficulty I have encountered --- mine or someone else's --- fear has been involved.

Sometimes fear is part of the problem. Sometimes fear *is* the problem. And when we are really paying attention, fear is usually part of the solution. Fear is an essential part of our nature, installed in our DNA, no doubt for very good reason. Fear is an alarm system. It is there to get our attention, to push us in one direction or another, out of harms way. Fear is not pathological; it is part of our intelligence, part of an ingenious guidance system to help insure our survival --- as individuals, as communities, and as a species.

How we face and respond to our individual personal fears is integrally related to how we respond as communities, as nations, and as a species to the external threats that we have faced, that we face now, and that we have yet to face. I believe that when we make the decision to stand and face our individual demons, we are contributing to the potential for peace throughout the world. The ripples emanating from our individual efforts to grow may be small, but they are there. You cannot drop a pebble in the pond without creating a ripple effect. The personal growth work you do is the pebble in the pond, creating its own ripple effect. How you treat your family and friends, and even the person standing next to you in the supermarket line are your pebbles in the pond. Maybe Roosevelt's vision of a world characterized by the four freedoms is still a possibility. If so, I am sure that it begins with facing our own fears.

We must emphasize this from the very beginning: our God-given mechanism of fear is not the problem. We have used our higher intelligence to create a monster out of what is essentially a healthy, natural response to adverse or potentially dangerous situations. This book is not about how to be rid of that monster, but rather how to live beyond its tyrannical control. This book will guide you to clearly identify the voices within your mind (be assured, we all have them), and it will give you a game plan, including specific techniques, to help you distinguish between healthy and unhealthy fear. The short version, the simple-but-not-so-easy, sound-bite version of this book is this: Separate the voices of healthy and unhealthy fear; listen carefully to, and follow the wise counsel of the healthy fear,

and tell the unhealthy fear to sit down and shut up. Of course if it were that easy you would not be reading and I would not have written this book.

It is essential that we begin by differentiating between healthy and unhealthy fear. The anxieties and worries that pervade our daily lives --- the real trouble-makers --- are not born from healthy fear, but from neurotic fear. Healthy fear stands guard responsibly, informing us immediately of real danger. Neurotic fear works around the clock, exaggerating, and even inventing potential dangers. Healthy fear is about protection and guidance. Neurotic fear is about the need to be in control. Healthy fear inspires us to do what can be done in the present. Neurotic fear speaks to us endlessly about everything that could possibly go wrong tomorrow, or the next day, or next year.

As you read on, I encourage you to personify each of these, creating specific human images to characterize your healthy fear and your neurotic fear. See them as two advisors, each with their own personality, each with their own agenda. The ability to perceive ourselves “in relationship” to our fears, rather than identified with or even possessed by the fears, is the single most powerful technique I have ever discovered to help overcome the control that neurotic fear imposes in our lives. This book will teach you how to identify, understand, and change *your* relationship with *your* fear. I strongly recommend that you practice this technique to the point of mastery. It can make all the difference in how you face the good in life and how you face what is genuinely scary.

Nothing in this book will hinder the functioning of your healthy fear. To do so would be irresponsible, compromising your ability to respond effectively to the very real circumstances of your life. If you sustain a head injury and go to your local hospital emergency room, the medical staff there will not administer medication for your pain until they are certain of an accurate diagnosis and proper treatment plan. Their refusal to rescue you from the pain is not sadistic, and not even because your HMO has not pre-approved pain medication in the

event of head trauma on a Wednesday afternoon. They will not medicate the pain of a head injury because to do so would interfere with their gathering of essential information that could save your life. The pain is the source of that information. Likewise, healthy fear is a valuable source of information for each of us, and we are well advised to follow the emergency room model, opting to pay close attention to the fear, rather than dulling it or distracting ourselves from it.

This book will teach you to identify and accept guidance from your healthy fear, and it will teach you how to stand up to, and move beyond, the toxic control of neurotic fear. To begin learning the important distinction between the two, consider the following scenario.

You sit in an office with two advisors. Healthy fear is the strong, silent type, and he assures you that he will remain vigilant, ready to inform you of real dangers as they come into view. That is, he will not expend his valuable energy dreaming up and telling you about every conceivable possible danger, imagining the innumerable ways things could go wrong. Further, your healthy fear advisor tells you that each report of real danger will be accompanied by reasonable recommendations about the intensity and timing of your response. For instance, the fear that will motivate you to jump out of the way of an oncoming bus will be quite different from the fear of not living up to a particular expectation you have of yourself. And the fear of being told you are at risk for heart disease will be different still. When you are in the path of the bus, healthy fear will not suggest that you remember to get a bus schedule the next chance you get, so that you can avoid being run over in the future. And when you are afraid that you have not lived up to your potential in a professional or personal situation, he will not recommend that you go stand in the path of an oncoming bus.

Healthy fear, it seems, will sort through and handle a tremendous amount of complex information, but his recommended responses will remain as simple and

efficient as possible. If the bus is approaching, get the hell out of the street. If you have an unexplained, persistent pain, make an appointment with the doctor.

Neurotic fear, on the other hand, is anything but silent. He will talk non-stop, pointing out every conceivable potential danger, small, medium and large. He suggests a rather steady anxiety --- tightness in your chest, butterflies in your stomach --- in response to everything from the potential of the deadly bus to the possibility that the person you met two days ago might not like you. This advisor, your neurotic fear, paces the floor as he talks. He doesn't sit down, he doesn't shut up, his very presence makes you extremely nervous. Your neurotic fear advisor constantly reminds you of potential negative outcomes. His philosophy seems to be "if something could go wrong, let's focus on it." When confronted with any success, neurotic fear remains unshaken. He has the ability to stand in the midst of quite positive progress, and continue to recite negative prophecies, spouting off its threats --- *If you do . . . (fill in the blank) . . . you'll be sorry. What makes you think you could ever . . . (again, fill in the blank)?*

For many of us, neurotic fear shows up early in life. My earliest memory of neurotic fear is the dread that filled me when I successfully completed fourth grade (with straight A's). Rather than feeling happy or proud of my accomplishment, I was convinced that I would certainly reach my limit of competence, and not be able to do "fifth grade work." Neurotic fear prefers to deal in extremes. I don't recall being afraid that I might be a little unprepared for the next test, or for fifth grade; I was always afraid of absolute failure. As I sit listening to my two advisors, I notice that neurotic fear has not changed a bit: he loves to predict total disaster.

The scenario continues: You sit behind your desk listening to and considering these two very different advisors. You look back and forth between the strong, silent one, and the constantly chattering, constantly moving, highly agitated fellow, who still talks even when you are no longer listening. You consider them

both for a moment. After a very short amount of time, giving it almost no thought, you put the second advisor --- the neurotic, agitated, fretful, doomsday prophet -- - in charge of my life. You choose The Bully.

If having this kind of meeting between multiple characters in your one mind makes you at all uneasy, be assured that these inner-conversations are not evidence of insanity, but the product of normal human consciousness.

One important goal of this book is to teach you to move past what I call “the myth of singularity” --- the belief that we are supposed to have only one opinion and one feeling at a time --- to a more realistic, and effective, frame of reference for thinking about your relationship to fear. Specifically, we will look at why and how otherwise intelligent human beings can look at the glaring contrast between healthy and neurotic fear, and in spite of what is rational and wise, consistently choose neurotic fear as our lead advisor.

Most people will recognize these two advisors. Some of us might say we know them intimately --- especially the neurotic fear, the one my wife calls “The Bully,” and one of my clients calls “The Chairman.” This scenario, in which you put the clearly least qualified fellow in charge of your life, is funny from a distance, and anything but funny when it is really happening. I want to take you back into that meeting, and encourage you to listen carefully to everything that is being said, and to consider all of the implications. I want to show you specifically how to make a different decision, how to fire your neurotic fear from his current position of authority, and how to reinstate healthy fear to its rightful place.

The neurotic fear will tell us that he wants only the best for us. He will never be caught wearing a “Bully” name tag. More likely he shows up claiming to be “the voice of reason,” “the realistic one,” “your best friend,” and sometimes “your only hope.”

Healthy fear, the one my wife calls “The Ally,” is not pushy. This one is clear, direct, and to the point. The Ally lives within us for one reason only: to protect. “The Bully,” on the other hand, will claim to protect, and may even intend to protect, but will continually step beyond the bounds of that job description. The Bully over protects, to the point of control. For many, his philosophy seems to be “If I can keep you from taking risks in your life, then you will be saved from hurt, embarrassment, disappointment and humiliation.” The relationship dynamic here is the same as any relationship in which one person dominates another. In such relationships, the “controller” maintains control by promoting a state of perpetual self-doubt. Bottom line: the lower our self-esteem, the easier we are to control. This holds true whether the controlling personality is a parent, a spouse, or a neurotic fear within us.

My intention is not to exaggerate or over dramatize the internal struggle we have with fear. It has been my experience that, although each individual will fall somewhere along the continuum in this matter, to characterize ourselves as “terrorist and hostage,” all wrapped up in one person, is most often not much of an exaggeration. We quite literally have the unfortunate combination of capacity and tendency to terrorize ourselves.

With this book, I hope to challenge you to embark upon a rescue mission. I have discovered, in my own life and in my work with others, that nothing short of life transforming decisions will do to put us back in charge --- or in charge for the first time --- of our lives. I want to guide you toward your fear, toward your own Bully, because running from him has not worked. I want to show you that he cannot control your life if you do not let him. And I want to teach you how to not let him.

As you read, I hope you will pause now and then in order to identify and differentiate one advisor from the other. You must learn to tell the difference between The Ally and The Bully if you are to make the change you want to make.

In group therapy --- or sometimes in my seminars --- I will direct a role play exercise in which the two advisors sit on either side of a lucky volunteer. After creating a short list of messages for each advisor (specially designed for the volunteer), I instruct both the healthy and the neurotic fears to speak to the person simultaneously. "Don't be polite," I tell the role-players, "the voices in our heads aren't. Just keep talking."

Each person's experience with the exercise will of course be unique, but there is definitely a general trend. People sitting between the two advisors usually report trying to listen and stay focused on The Ally, (saying such things as *It is important to remain true to yourself, The thing to fear is not standing up for what you believe in.*), but gradually losing the battle, ultimately hearing The Bully's messages clearly and losing awareness of the healthy messages. Not always, but often, the person in the middle will be noticeably leaning toward The Bully by the end of the exercise.

That's what we do: we lean toward the voice of neurotic fear. And we continue to do so even after we have uncovered the more authentic voice of healthy fear. Faced with this choice, how could we possibly continue to take the obviously negative option? Are we that inherently negative? Do we like being afraid all the time? Are we just stupid?

The answer is none of the above. We are not inherently negative, we don't enjoy scaring the hell out of ourselves, and we are not just stupid. Neurotic fear has firmly established itself within our consciousness in two major ways. First, and most simply, the neurotic fear messages have embedded themselves into our thinking through the years of sheer repetition. And second, a natural result of such repetition, the messages have achieved a high level of credibility. They are so familiar that we tend to trust them. In other words, we have been steadily and thoroughly brainwashed by The Bully.

The challenge we face is to reverse that brainwashing, to learn to do more than lean away from the voice of neurotic fear. We must learn to make the conscious choice to turn away from The Bully, and toward The Ally. In the group exercise, that is what we do: the person in the middle practices listening to the neurotic fear long enough to identify who and what it is, then he is taught to turn his back to The Bully, and face The Ally. It is still not easy, but with repetitious practice and a focused attention, the strength, credibility and wisdom of The Ally begins to assume its rightful place in our consciousness.

In the pages that follow, you will read about some very courageous people who have successfully done this work. And I will tell you about my own work as well. Long ago, I stopped attempting to distinguish between what I know as a mental health professional and what I know as a human being. I don't think I ever made much of a distinction between my clients and myself, other than to respect our individuality, and to remember who was the customer and who was responsible for providing the service. As cliché as this may sound, I believe we are travelers on a common road, or at least travelers whose roads intersect frequently. And it is through the process of sharing our experiences --- victories and defeats --- with each other that we will find our way to wherever it is we are going.

Please read these pages with a collaborative spirit. I invite you to participate by identifying with what you read and by trying on the ideas, philosophies and techniques included here. As a frame of reference, consider the following acronym as a map for the journey we are about to take.

Four Steps to Transforming Your Relationship with Fear

Face it.

Explore it.

Accept it.

Respond to it.

Facing the fear means that we end the running, cringing, and hiding from the scary voice within us, the voice that will always find us no matter where we run or where we hide. *Exploring* it means that we turn and walk toward the big scary Bully. If you think that doesn't take some courage, just wait. *Accepting* it, contrary to popular misconception, does not mean we agree with the fear, or that we like it. To accept is simply to realize there are some things we cannot change. The sooner we accept that the scary messages (neurotic fear) running through our minds will not just be erased, the sooner we can move on to investing our valuable energy in the last of these four steps. *Responding* to our neurotic fears is what it is all about, but the ability to change our responses can only be built on the foundation of the first three steps.

When new clients show up in my office for therapy, I want them to expect results. I don't want them to have unrealistic expectations of me or of the process of psychotherapy, but I do want them to believe that they will change as a result of the work we will do together.

Personal growth work --- in therapy, seminars, or self-help material --- should be collaborative. Never trust someone who presents himself as the ultimate expert on the human condition. I believe that I have something significant to share; otherwise I would not sit with clients or write a book. But more importantly, I believe that any truth you will discover here will be the product of your interaction with what I have to say. The innovative physician/healer, Patch Adams, points

out that we are all doctors and we are all patients. In this same way, we are all teachers and we are all students. I bring what I bring to the table, you bring what you bring, and somewhere in the mix, we discover truth.

Jenni is a young woman who has just in the past six months made tremendous progress in her recovery from an eating disorder. She is my favorite kind of client, an enthusiastic, proactive collaborator. She shows up at her sessions ready to fill me in on her progress or lack of progress since our last session, and she always has questions. These are not just rhetorical questions (I wonder why I am having such a hard time? Will I ever get past feeling stuck?); these are questions she wants answered. She doesn't object to the fact that she will very likely have to help me find the answers, but she definitely has an expectation that asking questions will lead to discovering answers.

There are different styles of being a client in therapy just like there are different styles of being a therapist. That is, beyond the obvious choices of personal philosophy, particular school of thought and specific techniques involved, there are the personalities of the people involved. Jenni's "client style" is active and energetic. During her sessions, she writes notes into a small, leather bound notebook, and describes what we are doing as writing a self-help book specifically for her. Writing in a journal during personal growth work can be extremely valuable. A few minutes each day spent recording some of your thoughts and feelings will help to keep you on track during personal growth work, whether you are attending therapy, participating in support groups, talking to a trusted friend, or just reading this book. Don't worry about being eloquent, or organized, or having good handwriting. Simply write a few thoughts down. It is a way of sitting down with yourself each day to ask, "How are you doing?" When you sit down and open your journal, you are asking the question. As you write, you are answering. Later, when you read what you have written, you are listening.

I encourage you to give writing a try. You might work with our acronym-map by writing, or write position-papers from the points of view of each of your advisors, The Ally and The Bully. Or just keep a journal of your thoughts and feelings as you read. I tell therapy clients that keeping a journal can save them time and money because sometimes sitting down with a journal can be as productive as a good therapy session. And as you will see, many of the therapy exercises I describe easily translate into writing exercises.

After giving it a fair chance, if you decide it doesn't fit with your personal style, then let it go. But maybe you will discover, as Jenni is, that you will be writing your own personalized self-help book as you move through this process.

For your sake and mine, please don't expect this book to heal all that ails you. But do take the risk of expecting something of me as the writer and guide and you as the reader and explorer. And if you are really serious about facing your fear and about transforming your relationship with fear, you may want to commit to reading this book twice --- once straight through, making notes of your immediate responses, and then a second time, more slowly, focusing more on your own writing process.

How ever you choose to proceed (there is no wrong way), I absolutely believe that if you are willing to remain open to these ideas, and if you are willing to gather and use some new tools as you read, you will change your relationship with your fear. The extent and longevity of that transformation will be purely dependent upon your willingness to put the tools to work in your life on a daily basis.

There are aspects of personal growth work that are exciting: the cathartic release of pent up emotions, the flash of insight, the comfort and relief that brand new self-compassion brings. And then there is the hard work, the daily application to what we learn along the way. You must be willing to commit yourself to both the

exciting (and scary, of course) and the mundane for any personal growth material to bear its fruit.

I have practiced sleight of hand magic with cards since I was a kid, so there are a couple of things I can do with a deck of cards that look pretty easy, but are actually the result of countless hours of repetitive practice. Recently I was working with Jenni, and I suggested that she simultaneously practice a particular sleight of hand move I have been teaching her and a specific new way of thinking in stressful situations that we have been discussing. I told Jenni that the point of my pairing these two learning challenges is simply this: you should not expect to master a new way of thinking without hours and hours of dedicated practice any more than you would expect to master the card sleight without practice.

I have done my best to include in this book plenty of stories, ideas and techniques that you will be able to use just by reading and doing a little thinking, like magic tricks you can do with minimal rehearsal. But if you will approach *Freedom from Fear* with the level of commitment it takes to master a complex card sleight, I know the material included here will help you to transform your life for the better.

Isn't it time you fired The Bully who has been running your life? Isn't it time to put yourself in charge? If considering this scares you, you have come to the right place. Welcome to the ranks of those of us who dare to walk around today believing the ridiculous notion that even though we do not control what might happen, we are in charge of how we will respond, and that the ability to respond is what will determine our level of satisfaction, fulfillment, and even happiness.

When we begin with the first step in our acronym-map, *facing the fear*, we put into play what I have come to think of as one of the most under-estimated and under-appreciated agents of change: *awareness*. Simply put: darkness is the

absence of light; where light shines, there is no darkness; and awareness is that light.

A significant part of what I do for a living is accompany people into their psyches, with my trusty flashlight. (I once heard someone say, “My mind is like a bad neighborhood --- you don’t want to go in there alone.”) We shine the beam of light here and there, destroying darkness. The interesting thing about the light of awareness is that once it has revealed something to us, even when the light has gone, and the darkness returns, we still know it’s there. Once revealed to our conscious minds, we can never return something to total darkness --- because we know it is there.

And so it is with fear.

Simple and powerful awareness is the first step to take. As you turn each page of this book, be aware of your fear. Don’t run. Don’t hide. Don’t cover it up with excuses, apologies, self-judgment, or mood-altering chemicals. Move straight toward it. The fear you have spent a lifetime trying to ignore is about to become one of your greatest teachers.

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