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Years ago, I was captivated by Yann Martel's novel, *Life of Pi*. When I finished reading it, I immediately went back to page one and read it again. The story centers on "Pi" an Indian Tamil boy who, after a shipwreck, survives 227 days drifting on a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean. With him in the lifeboat is a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker.

The novel has sold over 10 million copies, won numerous awards, and was made into a movie winning four Academy Awards. Yann Martel masterfully illustrates the uncertainty and relativity of truth and reality. He cleverly draws the reader into this fictional world with a note from the author that sounds like we're reading a true story.



As Pi is drifting on the ocean, he finds ways to produce fresh water and catch food from the sea while sharing the boat with a tiger intent on eating him. I was especially struck by a passage on fear (condensed for brevity):

"I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary...it goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unerring ease. It begins in your mind, always. One moment you are feeling calm, self-possessed, happy. Then, fear, disguised in the garb of mild-mannered doubt, slips into your mind like a spy...You become anxious.

Reason comes to do battle for you. You are reassured. Reason is fully equipped with the latest weapons technology. But, to your amazement, despite superior tactics and a number of undeniable victories, reason is laid low. You feel yourself weakening, wavering. Your anxiety becomes dread.

Fear next turns fully to your body, which is already aware that something terribly wrong is going on...Every part of you, in the manner most suited to it, falls apart. Only your eyes work well. They always pay proper attention to fear.

Quickly, you make rash decisions. You dismiss your last allies: hope and trust. There, you've defeated yourself. Fear, which is but an impression, has triumphed over you.

The matter is difficult to put into words. For fear, real fear, such as shakes you to your foundation...If your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you."

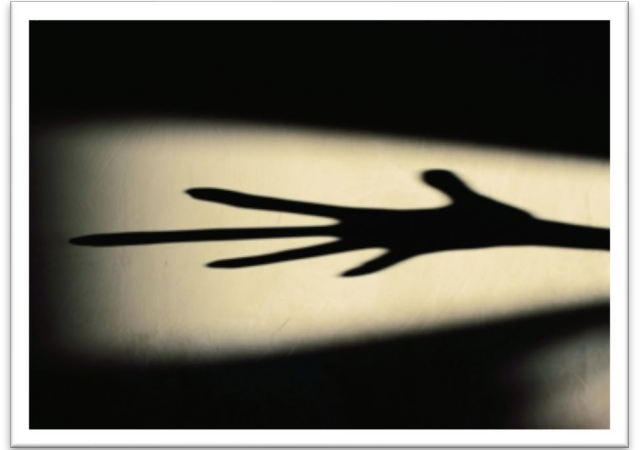
This issue focuses on fear. It's a dark force behind stress, worry, prejudice, extremism, bullying, avoidance, and ineffective leadership. Fear's many disguises mean it's often unnamed and allowed to hide in the shadows. Cognition -- thinking about our thinking -- through exposing and expressing fear is a key step in reducing it.

Fear creates doubt. That often leads to cynicism. And then we withdraw from following our heart and pursuing our dreams. As Martel puts it, "to choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation."

The Fear Factor: Visualization's Dark Side

Last month's issue discussed visualization as "The Force" that can pull us forward. But it also has a dark side that can energize our fears. Fear and pessimism can be even more powerful. This Dark Force too often overshadows positive possibilities.

Neuroscience shows we're wired to focus on what's wrong and picture bleak outcomes. When dangers lurked in the shadows, humans survived by picturing all the horrible possibilities and staying on high alert.



Fear is the dark side of imagination and visioning. It's a mind game we play on ourselves. A well-produced and realistic horror movie can make our skin crawl and pulse race. It can strike terror deep in our hearts. These extreme stresses and physical changes can be measured in our bodies. Yet the movie is just bits of sound and pixels on a screen. It's not really happening.

When our daughter, Vanessa, was a teenager, she was drawn like a moth to the flame to watch horror movies. They scared her so much she'd sleep on the carpet beside our bed. We'd keep telling her there's nothing to worry about -- that it was all in her head. But her imagination ran wild when she lay in her own bed, turning routine nighttime household sounds into a soundtrack for murderous spirits or evil beings coming to get her.

It's been noted that fear can be an acronym for False Expectations Appearing Real. Fear is a powerful form of imagery -- our own terrifying optical illusion.

Fear is a major cause of stress and anxiety. And it's an inside job. No one else can make us stressed or worried without our agreement. When we allow fear and worry to dominate our thoughts, they cast huge shadows over our lives and block out so much of the light and daily enjoyment that we could be basking in. These creeping shadows can darken or destroy our lives.

Stress and worry let the air out of the tires that roll us along through life. If enough air is released, the tires will be damaged, and we'll be forced to slow down or stop to address the problem.

Fear is a cunning and stealthy force in our personal and organizational lives. Fear kills team, and organizational effectiveness as communications close down, and conversations become ever more guarded and shallower.

Fear has a place in our lives. The motivational power of fear can even be crucial to our survival. If we're physically attacked, fear can jolt us with the adrenalin and motivation we need for fight or flight. Fear should warn us of danger, not makes us afraid to face it.

Fear is like fire. It can be a life-giving energy source, or it can badly burn or destroy life.

The Fear Factor: Do You Speak Up or Shut Up?

What would you do if you weren't afraid?

Overcoming fear has been a major theme in our work. Fear is appealing food for moose in the workplace. It attracts and nourishes them. Moose-on-the-Table is where everyone in a meeting knows there is an issue or problem, but no one is talking about it. It's like there is a large moose standing on the meeting-room table and no one is saying a word about it as if it's not there. The longer the moose is ignored, the bigger it grows. Then other moose attracted to the conspiracy of silence -- the perfect habitat for these moose to thrive, join it. And they start to have babies. Pretty soon moose are everywhere as everyone does their best to ignore them.



In my only book of fiction, [Moose on the Table](#), I centered the story on Pete Leonard, a manager "going along to get along." Many of the book's examples and scenarios come from our coaching, consulting, and workshop experiences. Here's a scene from a workshop Pete attended:

"What keeps us from having courageous conversations?" Jason (workshop facilitator) asked.

"Fear," replied a participant at the table just in front of Pete's.

"I agree," Jason said. "Take a few minutes at your table to discuss what sort of fear holds you back from talking about issues you know you need to address."

Everyone at Pete's table looked at each other without speaking. Finally, an older man across the table from Pete said, "As I look back on my career, one of my biggest regrets is that I talked about the moose out in the hallway or with a few colleagues in our offices after the meeting. But I didn't have the courage to raise the issue in the meeting when it really needed to be discussed. I guess I excused myself by rationalizing that I didn't want to rock the boat and jeopardize my job or promotion."

The man, feeling the support of the group, continued. "The financial pressure of raising kids, mortgages, and pursuing an ever-higher lifestyle put me on a path that reduced my options and slowly silenced me into just going along. I didn't think that I could afford to speak up and live according to my true values."

He paused to gather his thoughts. "I see now that it's far too easy to let our courage ebb as the tide of responsibility rises. I lost my passion and settled for the status quo. So, I ended up sedating my youthful ideals with booze, pills, and busyness."

Whoa! This guy is pretty pathetic, Pete thought. Life is about compromise. That's why it's better to keep your expectations low so you won't end up full of regrets like this gloomy old chap.

A couple of others at the table commented that he was being far too hard on himself.

"That might be true," the man said, "but with few working years left there isn't a lot of time to develop the courage and approaches it takes to start acting like a leader. Now is the time to start changing the next five years. I am determined to finish my career by speaking up and speaking out."

Jason asked the group how people were punished for naming the moose in their organizations. Many participants were keen to share their experiences and perspectives. Responses included being suddenly excluded; branded as not a team player; anger or irritation from the boss or peers; put-downs -- often disguised as humor; reassignment to less-important roles or projects; not being promoted or taken off the fast track, and even being fired or "downsized."

Is your workplace infused with fear or courage? Are you helping to reduce or increase the moose? What would you do if you weren't afraid?

[Quiz: Do You Have a Moose Problem?](#)

Thoughts That Make You Go Hmm on...Fear

"Anxiety is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained."

Robert Albert Bloch, American screenwriter,
"Psycho," "Psycho II"

"We usually learn faster from pain than from pleasure. Strong dislikes are acquired faster than strong likes. In relationships, trust is easy to lose and hard to regain. Something bad about a person is better remembered than something good, which is why negative ads dominate political campaigns."

Rick Hanson, *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence*



"It is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of hardship and death."

Epictetus, *Discourses*

"The ego is an important psychological structure that plays an important role in a human being's dealing with the world, but it is not ultimately who we are. In fact, the ego can create powerful blockades of pride, shame, and fear that prevent too many people from opening themselves up to love and healing."

Eben Alexander, *Living in a Mindful Universe: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Heart of Consciousness*

"Terror closes the ears of the mind."

Sallust, Ancient Roman historian, and politician

"Fear is always an anticipation of the future, an imagination. Notice what happens to your sense of trust and well-being, your belief about the world."

Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*

"Worry is a by-product of fear. And to live life with a constant, underlying fear of future pain is not to live at all. Fear and worry, more than anything else, are keeping people imprisoned and caged within the walls of their own imagination."

Joshua Benavides, *Break the Worry Habit: How to Stop Worrying and Start Living in The Flow*

"I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."

Mark Twain

"Apocaholics (the word is Gary Alexander's -- he calls himself a recovering apocaholic) exploit and profit from the natural pessimism of human nature, the innate reactionary in every person. For 200 years pessimists have had all the headlines, even though optimists have far more often been right. Arch-pessimists are feted, showered with honors and rarely challenged, let alone confronted with their past mistakes."

Matt Ridley, *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves*

"Our doubts are traitors; and make us lose the good we oft might win; by fearing to attempt."

William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*

"New York University's Dr. Marc Siegel explains in his book *False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear*, because nothing could be further from the truth: Statistically, the industrialized world has never been safer. Many of us are living longer and more uneventfully. Nevertheless, we live in worst-case fear scenarios."

Peter Diamandis, *Abundance: The Future Is Better Than You Think*

Tweet Reading: Recommended Online Articles



This section summarizes last month's LinkedIn Updates and Twitter Tweets about online articles or blog posts that I've flagged as worth reading. These are usually posted on weekends when I am doing much of my reading for research, learning, or leisure. You can follow me on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/JimClemmer>

My original tweet commenting on the article follows each title and descriptor from the original source:

Ancient wisdom at the heart of modern psychological approaches with strong science and evidence behind them.

[The Root of Fear](#), J. Krishnamurti,

"If the mind can understand the root of fear then the branches, the various aspects of fear have no meaning, they wither away."

Good reminders and tips for pushing back fear and living the life we really want -- not the one we fear.

[9 Essential Tips to Face Fear and Live a Bold Life](#), Tess Marshall, *Tiny Buddha*

"Too often, we allow fear, worry, and doubt to dominate and define our lives. We allow them to steal our joy, our sleep, and our precious dreams."

An excellent menu of practical approaches to reduce floundering and boost flourishing.

[33 Powerful Ways of Overcoming Fear...Right Now](#), Henri Junttila, *Wake Up Cloud*

"Getting through fear is a skill that anyone can learn. The problem is that most people cling to their fears, because it's part of who they are."

It's quite telling that employees rank creating goals ahead of increased pay and bonuses.

[15 Ways Employees Would Change Their Workplace](#), Macy Bayern, CXO

"Not only would employees conduct leadership differently than their managers, some also think they are more qualified."

Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments



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If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published over twelve months, you'll have read the equivalent of a leadership book. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

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