

LET FEAR BE YOUR TEACHER

Always move toward your demons.
They take their power from your retreat. -TR

What will happen tomorrow? Will your life go on as usual just as you expect or will someone space out, run a stop sign, broadside your car and change your life forever? Maybe tomorrow is the last day of your life. Hell, maybe today is.

Maybe your doctor has bad news.

What will be on the morning news when you wake up tomorrow? Will there be a new and improved sniper taking shots at people at random or targeting law enforcement? Will terrorists crash another airliner into a building or come up with some new creative way to kill some of us and scare the hell out of the rest? Will there be biochemical warfare? Will the economy take another nose-dive?

Will the pet you love so dearly be diagnosed with cancer?

Will you make it home from work tomorrow? Will you ever see your best friend again?

Lots of questions. An endless supply of very scary questions. And the answer to each of them is the same, and YOU KNOW what that answer is.

"I ---- DON'T ----- KNOW" is the answer.

Here's another good question: is the world in which we live more dangerous now than it was prior to September 11, 2001? Are things more unpredictable than they used to be? Or have we just been awakened to the unpredictable nature of life? It works like Highlights Magazine's Find-the-Hidden-Picture. Once our eyes are open to the harsh reality that life itself offers no guarantees, there is no way to un-see it.

I have a good friend who was walking around in perfectly good health (as far as he knew) one morning and by mid-afternoon he was in surgery getting a quadruple heart by-pass. The interesting thing about this fellow is his attitude. The first thing he said when he woke up in the recovery room post-surgery was "Man, I'm glad we caught that in time."

I have another friend who doesn't need emergency heart surgery in order to be miserable. He is more likely to walk around in perfectly good health worrying about the possibility that he might have a heart attack someday.

The difference between my two friends is that one has an active inner-voice constantly telling him everything that could possibly go wrong and my other friend either doesn't have such a voice, or more likely, he doesn't pay much attention to it. Many of us have this inner-voice, this intimidating bully-within. In the context of current events, we might think of it as an inner-terrorist.

The truth is there is no greater terrorist than "the terrorist-within." In fact that is what the terrorists in the big wide world count on: activating the terrorists within us. The fear that we have all been feeling so acutely for the past years is not something we have the power to simply be rid of. Ignoring what is going on in the world will not rescue us from fear any more than starting a war will. Fear is a natural part of the human experience and if we stop running from it, hiding from it, or trying to overpower it with machismo, we just might learn something from it.

When we are paying attention, open to the idea that life is about learning, fear can become an excellent teacher. Depending on how we listen to the voice of fear, we can either become inspired to live this present moment more fully or we can be dragged away from the present moment entirely, left to concentrate instead on all that might go wrong tomorrow. And if tomorrow is uneventful, then we can use that valuable time to fret about the next day.

As morbid or negative as this may sound, try beginning with the knowledge that we are all going to die. As they say, no one gets out of here alive.

Most of us will not choose how we will die but we all choose -- everyday -- how we will live. Sometimes we make these choices by default rather than decision, but nevertheless the choices are always ours to make. Let fear be a reminder to live your life in congruence with your own personal value system. When you feel fear creeping in, remind yourself that the healthiest fear is the fear of not living a life, no matter how short or long, that you can be proud of. Initiate the "Regret-Reduction Program" in your life, living each day in a way that you will not have to regret later. Create a daily practice of "Positive Opportunism," constantly asking yourself in the face of blessings and curses alike, "How can I use this situation to become a better person?"

After all, a life lived in fear of loss, failure and death is not really that much of a life.

The essence of what I believe --- and what I hope we can together spread around the world --- is this simple truth: fear is the natural companion of human self-awareness. We cannot refuse delivery; we cannot return to sender. How we choose to respond to fear is the ultimate measure of who we are --- at the end of the day and eventually at the end of our lives.

Practice tuning into fear in this way and you will transform something you used to run from into one of the greatest teachers of your life.

Thom Rutledge is a psychotherapist and author of several books, including *Embracing Fear: How to Turn What Scares Us Into Our Greatest Gift*. For more information, visit www.thomrutledge.com. Download Chapter One of *Embracing Fear* free: http://media.wix.com/ugd/e71801_46221674838d4fce8cd2f1b5b59c33cd.pdf

