4. The Key to Courage

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I've gone back recently to the mental attic where I had stored away, for keeps, as I had thought, the memories of a fairly long and eventful life. Turning them over, as one turns the leaves of an old album, I wondered what, of all my experience, was most widely significant. One of the questions I asked myself was, 'When was I happiest? When did I enjoy myself most?' And I came upon an unexpected answer: I have enjoyed myself most when I had been at my best, and I had been most often at my best when I'd been badly scared. By 'enjoying myself' I mean feeling that I've done a good job or reacted to some challenge in a way that makes it possible for me to trust myself, in the face of difficulty or danger. These occasions stand out in my memory like mountain peaks, bathed in a reassuring brightness. ❶

As a young child I was quite fearless. I had an unusual upbringing, isolated from other children, thrown on my own resources and even travelling extensively alone. It never occurred to me to distrust my own capacity to deal with any situation, or to be afraid of anything or anybody. Then at the age of 14, I was sent, for the first time, to school, where I met children brought up by orthodox methods. I caught fears from them as a child might catch mumps and measles. I became, almost overnight, timid and diffident. And timid and diffident I have remained. But whenever adventure or danger offered itself I've always snatched at it, in the teeth of my own fearfulness. And each time I've found that fear aroused in me unsuspected powers. ❷

When I first came to the United States and found out that my publishers expected me to make a speech at a public dinner, I was almost sick with fear. I had never made a speech in my life; in a group of people I was tongue-tied with shyness. To my

amazement, I found myself speaking fluently, telling stories, and sounding – as I was told afterwards – like a 'practised speaker'. I had in fact been scared right out of myself to the discovery of someone I hadn't dreamed existed. Now after many years of practice I am, I suppose, really a 'practised speaker'. But I rarely rise to my feet without a throat constricted with terror and a furiously thumping heart. When, for some reason, I *am* cool and self-assured, the speech is always a failure. I need fear to spur me. In this respect I am not alone. Actors and singers and public performers in general agree that unless they are on the verge of panic they are not likely to give a good performance. It is not, for them, a matter of 'conquering fear'; they welcome it as a stimulus, a shot-in-the-arm without which they cannot do their best. ❸

I believe this is true of men of action, too – that the bravest soldiers are not 'fearless,' but go into battle sweating with fear and keyed up by it to their highest point of courage and capacity. Army doctors have observed that it is not the 'tough guy' who endures best the stresses of war, but the highly sensitized and imaginative type that in fearful foresight agonizes over all that may happen to him and to those for whom he is responsible. As a noted preacher said, 'Fear rightly used is the father of courage.' ❹

In 1942 I was invited by the British government, together with several other women writers, to go to England to see how the British were standing up to their ordeal. The journey involved flying, of which I had always been horribly afraid – and now there was the added hazard of the world at war. I remember driving to the airport that night, lonely and scared to death. As I stepped into that dimly lit plane, my knees shook under me. But it was as though every faculty of mental and physical energy had been increased in me a hundredfold. When, after that interminable night in which my nerves were drawn taut, I landed safely on English soil, I felt refreshed and vigorous. And in the course of my journeying through Great Britain, whose people were subject, night in, night out, to deadly peril, I found the same glow of extraordinary physical well-being and spiritual exaltation. Under the stimulus of fear the British had developed

capacities of soul and body that were, in the eyes of the watching world, almost superhuman. ❺

I too lived through aerial bombardments. I felt the terror which they engender but I felt also the exultant response of 'courage to endure'. Indeed without fear there is no real courage. And without the assurance of courage – the power to rise to the level of any challenge – we cannot truly 'enjoy ourselves'. There is one fear that at first sight seems to be without stimulus of any kind – the fear that strikes us when someone we love is dangerously ill, perhaps at the point of death. But looking back on such dreaded moments, I realize that fear called up energy and resolution that normally I lack. I became, as the French say, 'outside myself,' so that I was able to throw into the struggle everything I had and perhaps a great deal more. ❻

An English writer, Noel Streatfeild, once told me that she was on her way to Singapore on a ship whose passengers were so bored and unfriendly that the journey threatened to be a disagreeable one. The captain, meeting Noel on deck, stopped her. 'You might drop a hint to some of those gloomy-gusses that tomorrow we shall be in the teeth of a hurricane,' he said with a sly grin. 'It may cheer them up.' Noel dropped the hint. And from that moment her fellow passengers developed a 'high-spirits-and-good-temper' that helped carry them through the following days of peril. ❼

You may object, 'But life isn't made up of exciting physical dangers. What about the fear of losing my job?' Well, worry isn't the same thing as fear. It is like a nagging, persistent ache compared to sharp pain. All the same I have a friend who kept his job because he was afraid. He was a capable but diffident and self-distrustful fellow, not likely to impress his superiors. He knew this and worried over it. One day he was called to the office of his vice-president. He was sure the axe had fallen, and worry became acute fear. Then something strange happened to him. He was free of some crippling restraint and in that high-hearted, slightly light-headed mood, he faced his superior. The vice-president, who, as he learnt later, had been preparing to drop him overboard, changed his mind. He posed some business problem which the employee resolved promptly and self-confidently. The interview ended in a handshake and my friend was promoted afterwards. Now he has learnt to enjoy fear. He has realized that under its spur he will be at his best. ❽

I believe that fear is one of our most valuable assets – a sort of key to our reserves, a means to call into action our latent capabilities. We do not therefore need to fear fear, much less be ashamed of it. We need only to handle it rightly, knowing that it can reveal our own strength to us and thus help us to the highest enjoyment of ourselves. ❾

Adapted from 'The Highest Point of Courage', Reader's Digest, *August 2000*

Discussion Questions

1. Answer each of the following questions in a sentence or two.

a. How did the author discover for herself the happiest moments in her life?

b. The author says she was fearless as a child. When and why did she become timid and diffident?

c. After becoming a 'practised speaker,' was she able to overcome her initial fears? What explanation does she offer for this?

d. How does fear help public performers?

e. Rewrite the sentence 'Fear rightly used is the father of courage', using 'if' without changing the meaning.

f. The author was terribly afraid of going to England in 1942 for two reasons. What are they?

g. There is one kind of fear which seems to be without stimulus. What is it and what did the author learn from experiencing it?

h. How do you define courage from your understanding of the essay?