

Fear Culture

Zoe



We all have fears. They are something we biologically inherit as well as integrate and accumulated over the course of our lives. Fear is also fostered in society by the constant stream of media projecting our worst fears on the nightly news. But, how much are we driven by fear? What makes our own fears so scary to us is that they become very visual and often graphically so—they become something we worry about even if they seem totally impossible. Fear is creative in the fact that it can work itself into any given situation; it's a natural part of our lives. Fear is defined as “an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat.”¹ Fear breaks down into four main components: anxiety, mortality, uncertainty, and irrationality. Through these categories, I want to break down the idea of fear and understand how we are affected by it.

Anxiety is an unusually generalized state meaning when we feel anxiety it's coming from an inner source. Anxiety is different in that there is no one, clear, objective threat. With anxiety we are unsure of what is dangerous in the present moment, but fear the unknown nonetheless. Anxiety is described as a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about an immediate event or something with an unknown outcome. Professor Joanna Bourke at Birkbeck College says “fear is an immediate, objective threat, while anxiety refers to an anticipated, subject threat.”² I have come to understand anxiety as parallel to fear; fear is immediate while anxiety is subjective. But the main difference between these parallel emotions is the individual's belief in his/herself as capable of assessing the risk of the given situation and identifying a supposed danger, and I believe this to be difficult for anyone experiencing an anxiety attack.

Mortality deals with coming to terms with death, the great conclusion to our life. Part of this is uncertainty of what ultimately ends our life, and what comes after it, if anything, seeing as there is no seemingly painless way to die because even in old age there are amounting aches, pains, and sicknesses leading up to it. We are deeply afraid of any kind of harm affecting our bodies, because biologically, we are hard wired to our own self-preservation. I think in today's culture there is so much to be afraid of when it comes to our wellbeing—we are constantly being informed of new stories from gruesome rapes and murders that it's impossible not to become imaginative in our own fears. In 2012, there were an estimated 1,214,462 violent crimes.³ These violent crimes—murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, and aggravated assault—have only increased.

I think we are all uncertain at some point but I don't think most people view *uncertainty* as a fear. Picture this: you're in bed at night and you hear rustling downstairs. Chances are it's just your dog or the squeaky floorboards of an old house, but there's still fear in the uncertainty that the sound might be coming from something or someone sinister. Fear and uncertainty are most evident in children: monsters under the bed, waking nightmares, and phobia attacks. But whatever the fear, we seek objective evidence to overcome uncertainty. Take the case of eleven-month-old “Albert B,” or Little Albert, a baby scientist John Watson had acquired from a wet nurse at the Harriet Lane hospital in Baltimore. Watson theorized that all fears are environmental as opposed to biological. Albert was given a white rat to play with; after receiving the rat a loud clanging noise was created behind his head, something that greatly upset Albert. This process was repeated several times. Eventually, Albert came to fear not only the rat but also all furry

¹ Google Definitions

² Fear: A Cultural History. Joanna Bourke - Shoemaker Hoard - 2006

³ U.S. FBI. 2012 Crime Statistics. *National Press Release*. Washington D.C.: FBI.gov, 2013. Print.

things. Albert became uncertain of himself because of the loud sound when it came to furry objects, so that even being in the presence of furry creatures was traumatic, and when presented with anything furry he would start crying because of the possibility that the sound would start again.

Irrationality. The most well known example of mass hysteria, occurred in 1692 in Massachusetts: the Salem Witch trials. Numerous young girls exhibited fits of screaming and shaking as if possessed by some unholy spirit. As a result of this, the town of Salem spiraled into chaos. Suspicions arose that anyone might be a witch, sending 150 citizens of Salem to jail,⁴ some of who were the town's most prominent figures. Nineteen people were to be hanged after conviction of witchcraft. The teenage girls continued to panic and to point fingers at high-ranking members of society, even the Governor's wife. Eventually the trials were ordered to end. This demonstrates how irrational people become in the face of a subjective threat, enough so that an entire town fell into hysterics at the hands of teenage girls.

On Halloween of 1938, Orson Welles performed *War of the Worlds*, a radio broadcast that had millions of listeners believing that a Martian invasion was happening; more than one million people became truly frightened of the Martian invasion.⁵ Listeners panicked with the news that the Martians were an unstoppable force and spread into mass hysterics, packing their cars and fleeing their homes. I don't think we are currently afraid of the Martians, but of almost anything the culture of fear generates. The culture of fear is all over the media. When big problems (immediate objective threats) go away, new problems (subjective threats) are there to fill the cracks. We are never without fear now because we are never without new information. To be honest, we live in one of the safest places and times to date, but local news is the worst demonstrator of this, intentionally showing the worst of our society for ratings and to create entertainment. The twenty-four hour news stations and the tacky Investigation Discovery network shows fill their airtime up with reasons to be afraid. Lou Dobbs, Wolf Blitzer, Nancy Grace, *To Catch a Predator*, *America's Most Wanted*, and Fox News, all exist to keep us informed of the many dangers out there.

We are afraid of almost everything, and everything is becoming an immediate, objective threat in the media. When we watch TV we find lots of scary stuff, but that's fine when it's fiction—a little bit of scary, scripted television is ok in moderation, kind of like processed sugar. Barry Glassner, Ph.D. at the University of Southern California says, "The problem comes when it's portrayed as reality, or even more importantly, when it's portrayed as news and dangers are being blown way out of proportion."⁶ Parents are so concerned nowadays that their child will be abducted in the five minutes the kid is outside of the home unattended, but they don't seem concerned with real potential objective threats like the child running into the street and being hit by a car. In reality, 80% of child molesters are relatives or friends of the family, but the fact that child abductions are so heavily covered by the news when they happen raises a perpetual fear among parents.

So with all the scary stuff happening, the question is: How do we gain a sense of control? By Okaying the media-broadcast fears, are we giving up piece of mind? There needs to be some break in the system in which we do not let the irrationality being presented to us, in

⁴ Linder, Douglas O. "The Witchcraft Trials in Salem: A Commentary." (2009)

⁵ Rosenberd, Jennifer. "War of the Worlds Radio Broadcast." *About.com 20th Century History*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 May 2014.

⁶ *The Culture of Fear*. 2009. Documentary.

various forms, to get to us. Olympia LePoint is an author and award winning rocket scientist. Her belief on fear is that “you must name and reject them.”⁷ This sounds simple enough, almost like a blow-off. But when you actually think about your fears, are they something that has been fostered by a greater machine like the nightly news or personal experience. I’m afraid of a lot of things, probably too many to list, but to just think about fear and rejecting that fear is a good beginning to the long process of weeding out the irrational and subjective threats we have come to integrate into our lives.

Fear has a lot to teach us. Despite all of this, people are hard-wired to be optimists. Even when we shake with fear, something in the back of our head is saying, “Don’t worry.” Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” I think our culture of fear is the scariest thing there is. We should fear being afraid all our lives. We don’t have to live like this, with constant anxiety of what plagues our future. Ultimately, we all die, and we *will* feel physical pain. There is no way around those two things; we all feel uncertain, but that’s okay because not all furry things are out to get us. We can get irrational, spread mass hysteria, start witch-hunts, and plaster the news for everyone and their dog to hear about it, but I believe that even in our bustling culture of fear we can all see enough reason to one day name and reject our own fears.

⁷ LaPoint, Olympia. "Reprogramming Your Brain to Overcome Fear." TEDx PCC. Lecture.

Works Cited

The Culture of Fear. 2009. Documentary.

John Waston - Little Albert. 2008. Youtube.

LaPoint, Olympia. "Reprogramming Your Brain to Overcome Fear." TEDx PCC. Lecture.

Linder, Douglas O. "The Witchcraft Trials in Salem: A Commentary." (2009)

Fear: a cultural history. Joanna Bourke - Shoemaker Hoard, 2006

Salem Witch Trials. N.d. History Reenactment. "Only Thing We Have to Fear Is Fear Itself": FDR's First Inaugural Address!

Thompson Walker, Karen. "What Fear Can Teach Us." TED Talks. Lecture

U.S. FBI. 2012 Crime Statistics. *National Press Release*. Washington D.C.: FBI.gov, 2013. Print.