

The Fear of Life And The Simple Act Of Inward Looking That Snuffs It Out

John Sherman

The Origin of the Fear of Life

The fear of life rises up automatically in us, most likely when we are ejected from the womb at actual physical birth. Without warning, we are abruptly awakened into a wild, raging storm of what we will eventually come to call experience, feeling, sensation, emotion, and so forth. Consciousness of our existence is driven from its deep slumber in the womb into a startling eruption of violent and erratic movement, pain, pressure, noise, glaring light, and all the drama that attends our expulsion into the world. Fear and contraction inevitably ensue.

The Effects of the Fear of Life

As time passes and we see that we have managed to survive that first onslaught of raw experience, the drama and intensity of the fear of life begins to fade into the background. For some of us, most of the time, it recedes into a barely noticeable murmur of anxiety, worry, discontent and distrust of our own lives that hums along incessantly as the background of all experience. It's the nagging sense that life itself is the problem with being human; that life itself lacks some essential quality needed for our well-being, or includes something very wrong. It's the sense that life will never quite live up to its promise.

This murmur of anxiety and discontent becomes, for most of us, the fundamental, unexamined assumption that shapes our minds, and forms the actual point of view from which we perceive our lives. Limited by that point of view, and

guided by that assumption, we learn to create understandings as to the state of our lives, and to take action based on those understandings.

We learn to resist automatically: we believe that life is inherently treacherous, and dangerous, and this belief creates a clear and present need to keep an eye out, looking for threat and the means to defeat threat.

We learn to be protective, defensive, guarded and closed in our relationships with one another, lest we be tricked by them, or miss the chance of salvation by them.

We learn to believe the billowing, shifting coloration of the life force that forms the background of our minds to be existential and emotional states that belong to us. We believe those states to be the very nature of our lives, of *ourselves* really, and lose hope.

Our Failed Attempts at Dealing with the Fear of Life

We have a long history of failure in seeking satisfaction by employing the strategies of understanding, grasping, destroying, and ignoring. Many have come to believe that it's the existence of the understandings and reactions themselves that is the problem, and that often leads to practices and pursuits designed to produce mental silence and quiescence. Some have concluded that thought itself is the problem, and should be stopped. And there are even those who recommend the snuffing out of ego, which is the Latin word for "I," which is nothing more than the name I call myself.

Now, all of these survival techniques and strategies — righteousness, resistance, clinging, indifference, murderous aggression, and so forth — have had good reason to appear and to be adopted by us in our own defense. We are mistaken in doing so, but with good cause. Life can seem profoundly untrustworthy and menacing, even as it beguiles us with false hope and promise.

For most of us, the default, tried, and true response to the dissatisfaction with life is steadfast, silent denial.

Trying to Cure the Disease by Treating Its Symptoms

We've been trying forever to fix our lives by reforming our minds; we try to make the mind sweet, loving, and open-hearted rather than closed and mean-spirited; intelligent rather than stupid; sane rather than insane; clear rather than confused. But the mind — its character, its strengths, its weaknesses, its assumptions, its point of view, its volatility, its emotions, its thoughts, its wrongness and its rightness — the mind is *not* the problem. The mind is nothing really but a cloud of effects, many of which are symptoms of the fear of life. Not seeing this, pretty much everything we have done seeking an end to the underlying discontent that spoils our lives, we have done trying to change the effects of the discontent, which is to say, trying to cure the disease by treating its symptoms.

And of course, nothing works. How could it? There is nothing inherently wrong with seeking relief from the symptoms, but treating the symptoms will not cure this disease.

I think it's useful to think of the fear of life as a disease. It's an affliction that came upon us without warning at our birth. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the nature of our being, the clarity of our consciousness, our righteousness, our

willingness, our understandings and beliefs, our worthiness or worthlessness. We had nothing to say about it, and nothing could have been done to prevent its arising. Its effects radiate throughout the life — arising in the past, spoiling the present, and projecting itself into the future.

And despite all our best efforts to eradicate the disease by attacking its symptoms, despite the devotion and commitment of the saints, despite the brilliance and insight that are to be found in the wisdom teachings, despite the rise of capitalism and with it wealth, and education, and time enough to look into these matters for ourselves, we have failed even to do much in the way of alleviating the symptoms beyond the self-denying impulse to become numb to them by a variety of means. Truth is, the vast majority of us live and die in a state of low-level misery and neurotic alienation from our own lives, punctuated by moments of passion and despair, silenced only by death.

It's not surprising that we've failed. We've been acting from an unseen and false belief all this time; the belief being that human life itself is the problem with human life. It doesn't take enlightenment to see that there is not much hope of finding a safe home in life when we are swimming in the river of pessimism and despair that flows from that belief.

We Can Do Something About The Fear of Life

But there must be *something* we can do. Clearly, some of us — not many, but some — seem to have found peace and freedom in life. The Buddha comes to mind, for example, and many others can be found in different times and traditions, all of whom seem to have achieved a profound reconciliation and fulfillment in human life. And, although they have been very successful in evoking in us the *feel* of what

they see, they have had little success in providing us with any truly useful advice on *what to do* that might allow us to see directly for ourselves what they saw.

I want to suggest something to you that you can do for yourself that works. I know it works because it worked for me, and it worked for Carla, my wife, and it has worked for a growing number of people around the world now; people who have, maybe even despite their better judgment, actually tried to do what I ask. I do have a theory as to *why* it works, but my certainty that it works comes from my own experience, rather than from a theoretical understanding, and the *why* of it is actually entirely beside the point. So here it is, the simple act of inward looking that snuffs out the fear of life.

If you will try, with your whole heart, to bring the beam of your attention into direct contact with the reality of your nature, you will snuff out the fear of life, which is the first cause of all human misery. I call this action *looking at yourself*. If you will just *try* to look at *yourself*, the disease will go away, and with it the perception of your life as a problem to be solved, a threat to be destroyed, or the hiding place of a treasure that will bring fulfillment and satisfaction. It's that simple.

Step 1: *Learn to Move the Beam of Your Attention at Will*

To begin, just relax for a moment, and notice the obvious fact that you have the power to move your attention at will.

As you read this, move your attention away from the text for a moment, and

direct it instead to the feel of your breathing. Notice the feel of your chest and belly expanding and contracting, and then bring it back here to this page. Do that a couple of times so that you become familiar with what I mean by “moving the beam of your attention at will.” That action of moving attention at will, as you just did, is all that’s needed to accomplish what I am asking you to do. The more you practice this simple act, the more you’ll become familiar with how it feels to do it. And the more familiar you become with the *feel* of it, the more skillful and direct you will be in the effort to move the beam of attention where it must go.

Step 2: Turn the Beam of Your Attention Inward

Use that skill to actually turn the beam of attention inward, trying to make direct, unmediated contact with the reality of your own nature, by which I mean you, just plain and simple you. You know what you are, and you will surely recognize yourself when you see yourself in this way. It really is that simple. Repeat this as often as it occurs to you to do so.

There is no step three.

A Few Tips About Where to Look

The act of inward looking may be simple, but the actual doing of it can seem anything *but* easy. But consider this: the feel of *you* is the only thing that is always here. All else — thought, belief, understanding, things seen and heard and felt, emotions, pain, pleasure — literally all else comes and goes. So, looking for you is looking only for *what is always here*. Anything that is newly arrived, no matter how wonderful it may be, cannot be you. Likewise, anything that has been here and left, even if it might return, cannot be you.

Furthermore, you are the plain and unmoving field in which all else comes and goes. You have nothing to give to you or take away from you and you are, therefore, profoundly uninteresting to the mind's eye, which has no purpose other than to keep vigilant, to stay on the lookout for things to grasp, things to reject and destroy, and things that are safe to ignore in a forest of bright, shiny, ever-moving, fantastically fascinating parade of phenomena. The fear of life is a kind of *auto-immune disease*. Its only function, insane as it may be, is to keep you safe from your own life, and this mission demands ceaseless attention to incoming phenomena. Because of this, its natural orientation is ever outward. You, on the other hand, are wholly and perfectly inward (more on that below).

Here are a few suggestions that some have found helpful in this endeavor:

- Try to bring to mind a memory of some event in your early childhood. It doesn't need to be anything important: being in a room with adults, leaving a movie theater, looking out the window, any memory will do, so long as you can evoke a reasonably accurate memory of the feel of it. Now, just for a second, see if you can remember *what it felt like to be you* then. Not what the *event* felt like, but what it felt like to be you. You may get just a fleeting whiff of it, and if you do, you will almost certainly recognize that it is exactly the feel of you *now*;
- Notice the fact that you are certain of your own existence, in a way that you are certain of *nothing* else in the world. Look there, at that certainty, because that certainty itself is just another name for you;
- Look for what is always here, what never moves, or changes, or comes, or goes. Everything in the universe moves. Everything moves but you;

- Look for the *person-ness* of you. Nothing in the universe feels like a person but you;
- See that there is literally *nothing* inward but you. Many sensations and experiences are thought to be inward that are not. Emotions, thoughts, visions, dreams, desires, aversions, pains, pleasures, experiences of all kinds that appear in the interior of your mind are *outward* from you, and when you attend to them, you are looking *outward* — no matter how *inward* they may feel. It's not that there's anything wrong with looking outward, it might even be said that looking outward is your main occupation in human life. It's just that when you are seeking to look at yourself, *outward* is the direction in which you cannot be seen. If you can understand this distinction, you can find your way home using outward phenomena to funnel your attention into the right orientation. When attention is turned truly inward, it is looking directly at you, and nothing else.

There are probably more tips like these to be garnered from those who have travelled this road, but they are all, as the saying goes, merely fingers pointing at the moon, and the moon they point to is only you. In the end, you must do this for yourself. It is, after all, you that you seek to touch with the beam of your attention, and no one can possibly know the feel of you but you.

Your Attitude and Expectations Are Irrelevant

Understand that it may be that you never get an actual, recognizable experience to confirm that you have succeeded; as I said, you are not very

interesting to the mind's eye, and the contact with the reality of your nature will be so fleeting — a tenth of a second or less — that you may never know that it happened. But here's the good news: *it doesn't matter*. It seems clear, from the common experience of many by now, that a sincere effort cannot fail, no matter how strong the feeling of failure might be. We are not, after all, trying to do this to *find out* who we are, or to *understand* what we are, or to dissolve into our true nature and *become* what we are, or any other such thing. We do this only to cure the disease of the fear of life with the medicine of inward looking.

This act requires only one thing: the *intent* to turn attention inward to try to get the direct experience of the reality of our nature. It doesn't matter whether that intent arises and is met with distaste, or fear, or dismissal. If the intent arises, the looking will occur and, if the looking occurs, the end is certain.

One other interesting aspect of this effort is that neither your attitude nor your expectations seem to have any effect on the end result. The intent to look at yourself can be evoked for any reason at all. Maybe you decide to look at yourself because you want to be happy, or you want to save the world, or you want to be free of pain. Or you may think that you are not 100% committed to the looking and, therefore, you wonder if it will work. None of that matters at all. All that matters are the moments when you look. The looking does the work, regardless of what you think about it, or what you may expect to gain from it.

The inward looking is in no way an end in itself; it is only the *means* to be free of this disease. When its work is done, I predict that you will find yourself so fully engaged in life that you will have trouble remembering what all the fuss was about that brought you to the looking in the first place.

The Course of Recovery is Uncertain But Your Success Is Guaranteed

The course of recovery from the fear-of-life disease is unpredictable. For some, things clear up pretty easily, with little inner torment; for others, the course of recovery can be quite painful and prolonged. My own recovery was quite unpleasant. It took a year or so for me even to notice that the fever of discontent had broken. It was another five years before I began to notice how profoundly different and easy my relationship with life had already become, and more than twelve years before I could speak clearly about what I had found.

So, how long it will take, and how difficult it will seem to you is uncertain. But if you will just look, the end is certain. You will lose the sense that life is out to get you, and the sense that you are trapped here. You will lose the felt need to protect yourself from the thoughts, the emotions, the opinions, the sensations, and all else that comes and goes within you and makes up your actual, ever-changing life. You will come to see that the things that come and go within you are deeply interesting, in a way that you could not have imagined when your view was clouded by fear.

In the end, you will find yourself fully immersed in your life — as you have always been. But now, you will find yourself enthralled and interested, engaged in, enlivened, and fed by the way life actually unfolds. You will see clearly that your life is the fulfillment and satisfaction you have been seeking elsewhere. You will go sane.

John Sherman

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Ojai, California

<http://www.riverganga.org>

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