

I discover a door

We are gathered in the morning room engaged in an open conversation about the Ecology and Spirituality Module and the MA. The discussion centers around the inherent paradoxes of the subject and the academic format. In her perfectly pitched directness, Eve, with understated exasperation, pushes back at the groups expressed anxieties. 'But guys you signed up for an MA!' she says. Many are shamed into an uncomfortable silence. A few last comments from people who have had their hands up remain including mine when Jay, with a motherly irritation in her voice, says 'I think we should stop now and acknowledge that Eve has heard us and not do any more of this back and forth butting in with our feelings'. This strikes a deep chord of emotion. I struggle to describe the chemistry but while my outward appliance remains true to my Scandinavian designer coolness the inside I flinch, flush and feel. But what am I feeling?

I take everything that both Eve and Jay say personally, directly and deeply, even though I know that it was not specifically directed at me. At that moment it is and it comes rushing in. Were we not just invited to ask questions in a spirit of openness and vulnerability? I fucking know we signed up for an MA! I'm not making excuses or cowering, just expressing that these are some of the challenges ahead. And, who the fuck are you, Jay, to judge and take on the role our teachers lieutenant deciding who's opinion and emotions are worth listening to or not suggesting that we are a bunch of whining kids wasting Eve's time?

I suddenly feel myself responding in a way that I know well. I am offended. I am angry. I rear up in response to the rejection. Oh yeah?! If this is what it's going to be like, then fuck you. I'll leave you in the dust. Watch me. I know this feeling. I've had it many times before. It's been there at pivotal moments in my life, and it's fueled some of the key elements of my career. I've been good at it. This response has made me win many times. I don't fight like the bear with teeth, claws or like men fists and screams. I fight and win with intellect, control, precision, and coolness. I hide, I intimidate, and I stay moving.

But, now I stop. This feeling is so familiar it has something stale about it. I struggle to put my finger on it exactly what. I have been here before at this fork in the road. This emotional response is instinctively pushing me. The path it pushes me onto is wide, and it leads to a dark bridge without end or contact with the ground. So I wait. I did not come to Schumacher to engage with the familiar, the known. I sit with it. Gradually the explosive emotion quietness down and turns inwards. What was that feeling?

Falling down

The wider envelope of the Dartington estate became a processing ground. A safe space. I wake before dawn and do my morning ritual. I journey to meet spirits and then run in the dark. The land draws the thoughts and emotions from my body and new ideas and insights take shape. Everything becomes more clear. Stopping, I feel into it and sit down against a Cedar tree. A familiar sorrow wells up in me, and I start to cry. Suddenly I realize that I am grieving for myself as if I am lost or dead. I am startled by this and by how familiar this feeling is. Its been with me for a long time. Later that night I am pacing in the darkness of the night in my room. I

can feel that I am holding something. The Swedish word is 'ruva', or brooding in English. I am holding something important that is about to emerge. When it comes it changes everything.

It was fear that feeling I had in the morning room that day. Connecting to the singular raw emotion is like a massive set of dominoes falling. I was afraid of not fitting in and not being accepted. I wanted to be seen and heard and what happened made me feel rejected, and belittled. I was afraid to fail. I was a little boy in a new place and more importantly a place that really mattered to me. What makes it profound is that I suddenly see how often, and at critical junctures, fear was in charge and I didn't know it. I can see how much fear I have felt, where and in what situations, what role it has played in my life. I also understand how I have masked it in words like stress, anxiety or just repressed the fear demanding of myself to be a tough, fearless man. How many times have I reacted in the same way as I did that morning and turned the fear into fuel for action? Looking at it now, I realize that by not connecting to the actual emotion that fuel propelled me in ways that I had no control over.

On fear and being a Man

I am the progeny of two distinct northern European lineages. The families of my Swedish mother and my Scottish Welsh father contains cultured, intellectual warriors in the best British tradition, Orde Wingate, and T.E Lawrence are among them, as well as doctors, ministers, professors, artists and writers. Both of my families have emotional repression as a defining characteristic and despite growing up in a very progressive alternative village in Sweden in the 1970's and 80's I was brought up to control my emotions and to look down on people who could not. Apsley Cherry-Garrard who accompanied Robert Falcon Scott on his ill-fated bid for the South Pole wrote of his companions that 'they displayed that quality which is perhaps the only one which may be said with certainty to make for success, self-control' (Gonzales 2003: 38) Alas, self-control has served me very well in my life but only for certain kinds of results.

Deeply immersed in a high power executive job in Chicago a senior colleague once told me that in the US your level of responsibility and compensation is directly correlated to the amount of stress you are able to manage. There is perhaps nothing out of the ordinary about that statement unless we question the existence of stress. We've been taught to accept that stress is a natural part of life, but stress is the body's natural response to fear.

Since 2009 I have spent part of my summers teaching at a survival school in southern Utah. We take students on physical and mentally challenging journeys through the canyons and mountains of the desert wilderness. A key lesson from the field is that there are times when you must control your emotions to be able to act appropriately to preserve your own life. In the critical minutes following an accident, the ability to control panic, slow down and make an honest appraisal of your situation, pulling your self together as the British would say, and take decisive action is a key determinant between life or death. While this is indeed a critical ability, it is a response to an emergency. Once the emergency passes and the source of the fear and panic have been addressed, things should go back to baseline. Repression is no longer needed.

But through a process of adaptation, the survival skills of emotional control are being used daily for us to operate in the culture that we have created. Our relationship with fear and the stress that follows is so internalized it has become invisible. We speak of stress as something natural, unavoidable and as something that just needs to be managed. Many modern modalities of

therapy have as their objective to help manage the stress. But being propped up to return to an unfolding 'emergency' is not healthy nor sustainable.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, psychiatrist, and pioneer in near-death studies writes:

'deep down, at our cores, there are only two emotions: love and fear. All positive emotions come from love, all negative emotions from fear. From love flows happiness, contentment, peace, and joy. From fear comes anger, hate, anxiety, and guilt'

(Kubler- Ross 2010: 118)

Fear then, and the negative emotions that flow from it, is one of the fundamental building blocks in the power structures of our culture. The patriarchy is created and maintained through fear. When there are hierarchies, rules, and sanctions the fear will be there. This MA is no different. What's labeled incentives or the positive values that motivate our actions in a hierarchy and certainly in the capitalist doctrine, has a shadow twin made of fear. Will I be able to feed and house my family? Will I be able to afford my children's education? Will I be accepted? The selective interpretation of evolution as an ongoing struggle where only the strong survive meshes with capitalist doctrine, and I believe creates a mechanism that makes fear the intermediary to love. This mechanism is central to western culture and global capitalism in profound ways that are not quite visible to us. Out of this fear we are competing and consuming our way through the earth's resources in the hope that we will be loved and find peace. There are significant social sanctions for those who are not able to control their emotions. But what is the purpose of emotional repression if not to let the status quo remain? What would happen if we acknowledged our fear and refused to accept it as a constant? And, what if that which we actually feel holds the key to our salvation?

Love

'Since love and fear can hardly exist together if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved' Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince

In his book *What the Robin Knows* (Young 2012) wildlife tracker and storyteller Jon Young speaks of how all animals are either being pushed or pulled by their emotional response to forces such as, weather, a food source, a threat, the desire to mate. Andreas Weber's thesis in his book "Matter and Desire" that love is the driving force at the heart of everything that is alive supports this idea. It casts fear in a different light where the baseline state of being is one of peace and contentment, and the prime driving force is desire and love. Interestingly the root of the word emotion comes from the Latin verb *Emover* which means 'to move away'. Emotion is an instinctive response aimed at self-preservation. (Gonzales 2003: 30).

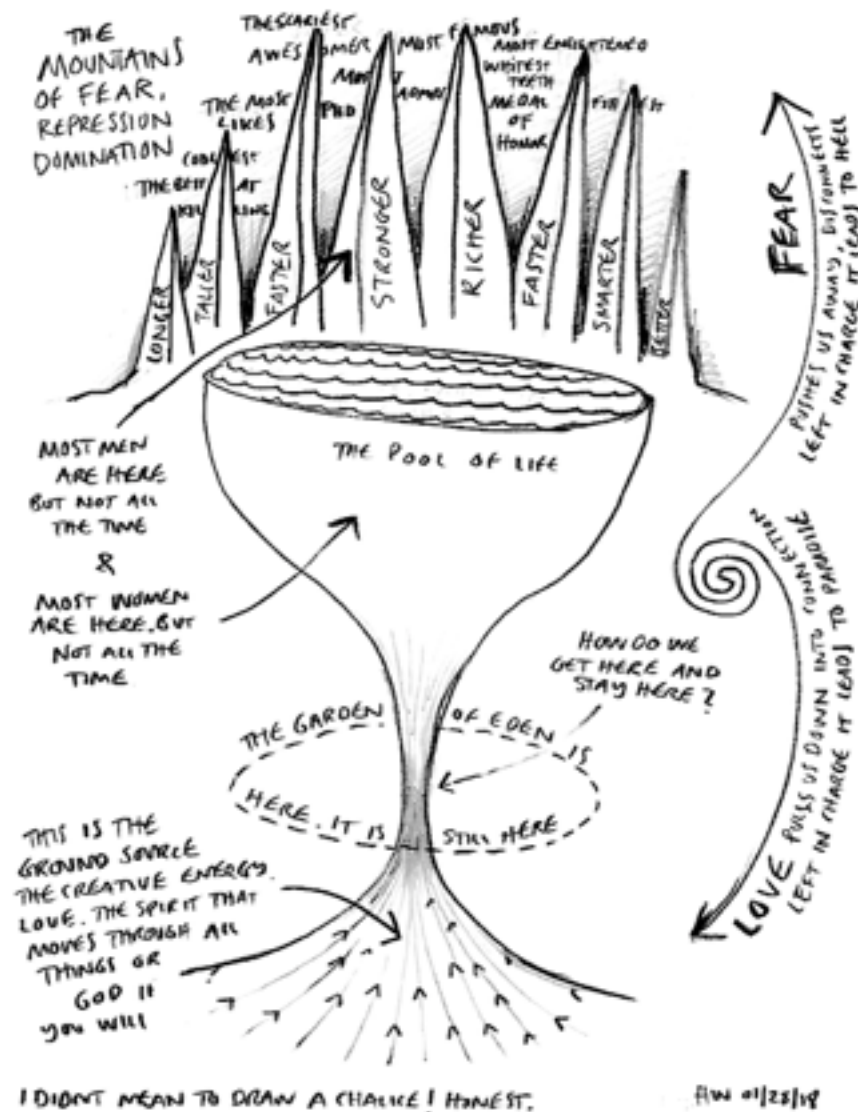
As animals, we are guided by our emotions. Fear is a temporary and rare but necessary element in the dynamic of life. If we accept the contemporary view that life is governed by natural selection in a constant battle for survival in a world of scarcity, then we also agree that fear may be a constant. This is the baseline state of being in much of the western world. But in an alternate view, shared by many indigenous peoples, Gaia provides everything we need in abundance, her environment optimized for life where natural selection is more about collaboration and symbiosis. (Harding 2009) In this worldview, fear is a temporary emotional state in response to a direct threat.

As Elizabeth Kubler-Ross points out 'If you are in a state of fear you cannot feel love' (Kubler-Ross 2010: 118) So if Weber is right that love is the guiding force of everything that is alive how can we find our way when because of fear we cannot feel love? One of the central lessons that Elizabeth Kubler-Ross learned from her patients on their death bed during her many years in hospice was that when accepting their imminent death people were able to let go of their fears and in doing so were able to see that a different life was possible. (Kubler-Ross 2010: 118)

As I walk slowly from flower to flower in Dorothy's gardens, they speak to me. In this unusual January bumble bee's are out, and the Jasmine is blooming. The fragrance of the witch hazel and the Oregon grape is intoxicating. The flowers speak of desire and creation. I kneel by the spring at midnight. The wind is blowing through the dark trees overhead. The process of opening and deepening is far gone now. I can feel the energy of the water, the life that it gives, flowing through my feet up into my core. At the edge of the gardens, I climb a tall Cedar. The storm winds pummel me and shake the tree. The feeling is one of being held, brought to life.

A vision, a map

I am an artist. My job is to see things that don't exist, decide what should be brought into this world and give shape to it. I am a seer and a storyteller in this way. It was not a choice of title or profession rather I chose a territory that allowed for a transgressive exploration. Grasping at the dynamics of emotions, its role in our disconnection with the natural world and the linked ecological crisis, here is a vision that I had:



I can see it and I have felt it. There is a ground source, a great spirit. It is love. It wells up into a pool that all life resides in. Guided by love, and with our emotions flowing freely, we can reside there and we can find our way. Paradise is there to be found. But when we become fearful, we shut down. When what guides our life becomes fear instead of love we are expelled from the pool and start climbing the mountains at its edge. We men built these mountains and they are cold, dark and lonely even though so many of us are there together. The mirage at the summit beckoning us onwards. The fear of not reaching it drives us scrambling for the top. Survival of the fittest. If I only pull myself together a little bit longer, I can make it.

Epilogue

The reason I am writing this, why this feels important, is that I have been here. I have been at the depths of connection growing up feral in the Swedish forest and deeply immersed in the sacred order of nature. I have explored the territory between the mountains and the ground source through my work as an artist and wilderness guide and through my spiritual practice. I have also experienced, felt the fear that creates and drives the patriarchy. That which disconnects. I have participated in and traded with the currency of fear that lies at the heart of the capitalist economy. I fought hard to get up the mountain, and I was good at it. I have also paid the price. Pursuing what I was told was important, I did everything I was supposed to do. But being frightened into pursuit, ignoring what my emotions were telling me, drained my life force. Dissonance, confusion, and depression followed along with pain and anger. I know that this is why men die young and why they become violent. At the heart of the patriarchy and toxic masculinity are frightened, repressed men. Maybe, at the most fundamental level, the spiritual underpinnings of the ecological crisis are about emotions and our habit of not letting ourselves be 'moved' by them to find our rightful place in the sacred order of nature?

These first three weeks of the program were like one big ceremony in which I kept falling into my own shadow. Terrifying but somehow with the delectable feeling of being shown a truth and with it new possibilities. I had been taught not to listen. I had the keys but was too afraid to use them. Maybe now I am no longer being pushed by fear but pulled by desire?

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