

Fear Not!?

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So here we are poised on the edge of a historic week: 79 years ago, on the 28-29th of October, the stock market came crashing down and the Great Depression began. It had been building for weeks, perhaps months, but the ticking bomb of economic calamity finally went off this exact week lo those many years ago, leaving the foundational fabric of American prosperity in tatters for decades to come. Could it happen again? Are you afraid, very afraid?

It strikes me that in the midst of the unprecedented volatility—at least in our lifetimes—of today’s political, economic and financial landscape, there is only one constant: FEAR. Whether it is the kind of fear that is actively being used as a tool to win votes (see Republican play book) or the kind of fear that is more covertly spread across the airwaves by newscasters and their financial and political “experts” in the guise of “financial anxiety”, stress, and worry, FEAR is the theme of the day. So how does one cope?

Well, as I point out in my upcoming book, ***Shift it! Let Go of Fear and Get Your Life in Gear***, the first step in any coping strategy for fearful times is this: know thy enemy!

Before we can engage with fear in any meaningful way, before we can shift it—and release its power over us—we need to comprehend this paradox: fear is a good thing. That’s right. We have to step back, take a deep breath, and get clear on the fact that FEAR is a perfectly normal, totally human, response to uncertainty, unpredictability, and the unknown—otherwise referred to as “life”. Fear is designed to protect us.

Fear is something we learned from people who loved us: our parents, our teachers, our friends. As innocent and playful children running around the living room or rolling in the grass, there was nothing to fear: life was pure adventure...fun, fun, fun. BUT...somewhere along the way, for all of us, the REALITY of germs, dangerous doggies, sharp objects, hot stoves (you name it!) came along, and along with these came the parental warnings: “be afraid, very afraid”. Of course, protective pundits of adulthood were only triggering in us the genetic warning systems that were already in place: by the time we are seven years old, we are hard-wired to experience fear as a physical, emotional, and cognitive response to real—or perceived—danger. AND...thank god for that!

The problem as I see it, isn’t fear. The real challenge in times like these, at least for me and many of my clients—and believe me, we discuss FEAR a whole lot these days—is *denial*.

Here’s the rub: fear is a very real and measured response to the unknown; it is natural and once understood for what it is, what purpose it serves, and how it manifests, it can be worked through, and released. Denial, on the other hand, is what the psychiatrists would call a double-door defense: defending against a defense. Denial is a tricky form of

avoidance, a cover-up, a ruse. Denial shows up most blatantly in circular logic: “I am worried because I’m so anxious”...or “I’m so stressed out about my anxiety”...or even better: “all this worry about the economy is making me feel out-of-control and anxious”. You get the idea?

We talk ourselves in circles about anxiety, stress, worry, lack of control...and eventually, if we feel safe enough to let down our guard, a little reality pokes through: we are fearful. Yup. Simple. We are not in control. We are going to die. We don’t really know what is going to happen tomorrow, the next day or the next. Wake up and smell the Starbucks. Reality, meet denial.

OK, if you’re still with me, you probably feel like this idea of breaking through the denial of our sad, sorry state of affairs is the end of the story. Fade to black...or should I say bleak? BUT NO. The opposite is true: We are now, and only now on the path towards peace, joy, and resumed happiness. This is only the beginning, for once we break through the glass ceiling of denial, and recognize (key word: RECOGNIZE) that fear is a perfectly natural response to the condition of being human, animal, nature (yes, I know we deny this one too most of the time!), we are back on track towards our natural state of bliss. Yes, you heard me: bliss!

The first step towards releasing the binding and blinding hold of fear on us is this: recognize fear, name it, own it, label it, and accept it. Go ahead, you can say it, “I am afraid. I don’t know what’s going to happen, and I’m scared.” Truth. Now breathe.

It takes a whole lot of wasted energy—energy that could be used for all sorts of creative, innovative, amazing feats of the imagination that move us light years beyond our fear—to hide out behind the walls of anxiety, stress and worry. They are all FEAR.

So let’s all breathe a sigh of relief and welcome in the truth: fear is real. Fear is designed to protect me. Fear is my friend. So...the first step towards **SHIFTING IT!** is to welcome the gift of fear and stop denying that I feel it.

On that note, let’s take a breather and maybe now we can all relax a bit. Tomorrow we’ll talk about how to DEAL with fear once we’ve got it square in our sights. But since it’s Sunday...and the Great Depression, part 2, hasn’t arrived quite yet, so let’s take the rest of the day off.

Cheers!

Dr J