

Transforming Fear & Living Fully

By Kelli Thomaides

Joseph Campbell said, “The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.” Authenticity is often a fundamental value of someone who pursues personal growth. However, it can be one of those elusive qualities that we notice in others whom we admire and respect, but have trouble developing ourselves. Many of us experience cognitive dissonance because we have difficulty aligning our *xin* (heart/mind) with our core beliefs and taking action that supports our growth. Often, it is because fear prevents us from doing what we want or need to do. The moment we become tired of watching our lives unfold while hearing our hearts whisper in the background, “this is not what I had planned”, is when we gain the strength we need to transcend our fear and begin to live more authentically.

The movie “Defending Your Life” accurately depicts the struggle to acknowledge one’s fears and break through them. The characters are people who have recently died and must review their lives in order to determine if they conquered their fears and learned the lessons that their lives offered. Pivotal moments in the characters’ lives are projected onto a large viewing screen, showing circumstances when they either succumbed to their fears or moved beyond them. The characters must defend their behavior and explain their motivations to the presiding judge. At the end of the hearing, the character is either granted permission to move to a higher level of existence, or he/she must return to earth to try again.

At some point in our lives we will review our decisions, much like the characters in “Defending Your Life”. If we wish to be honest with ourselves, we will ask: Have I opted for real growth and challenge, or have I always taken the path of least resistance and succumbed to fear?

Before we attempt to answer this question, it may be helpful to clarify what fear is. In general, fear is an unpleasant feeling of perceived risk or danger, whether it is real or imagined. More specifically, fear is: an emotion experienced in anticipation of some specific pain or danger; an anxious feeling; or a profound emotion inspired by a deity (i.e., the fear of God). When we anticipate physical danger, our sympathetic nervous system kicks in and we experience the “fight or flight” response. This is an evolutionary mechanism which is essential to our survival. Sometimes it is appropriate and even necessary for us to experience fear and act on it. However, when we start responding to every

situation in life with a “fight or flight” mentality, we waste a great deal of energy and miss opportunities while needlessly trying to protect ourselves. Furthermore, psychologists have determined that a high anxiety “fight or flight” mentality is unsustainable and therefore it usually leads a person to have a breakdown, sometimes manifesting as depression.

In “Defending Your Life”, one of the lawyers describes fear as “a giant fog that sits on your brain and blocks everything: real feelings, true happiness, and real joy.” Then he points out that when you lift the fog, it’s a joyous and adventurous experience.



Witnessing our Fear

Daniel is the main character in “Defending Your Life”. For him, fear manifests in two main ways. He either makes excuses as to why he does not do things or he worries about what the “standard” or the “norm” is and whether or not he meets it. Daniel is preoccupied with others’ opinions of him. During one particularly vulnerable moment, Daniel turns to his love interest and says, “I am tired of being judged.” Throughout his trial, he is concerned with controlling his image and therefore he is not able to act authentically. When the lawyers point out Daniel’s preoccupation with his image, he is able to start dealing with his fears in a conscious manner and thus gain some control over them.

Fear is an impulse that causes a visceral reaction in our minds and bodies. When we see ourselves reacting to situations with fear, we can choose to witness how it affects our emotions, thoughts, and behavior. We might sense our heart beating quickly, feel ourselves “close up” emotionally, or suddenly have anxious thoughts. If we practice witnessing, we will gain insight as to why we behave the way we do, and ultimately we’ll be able to change our behavior. The Heart Sutra is a powerful tool that can guide us in witnessing. This is because reciting the Heart Sutra helps us to calm down,

regain energy, and see our feelings and thoughts from a more objective point of view. When we put our intention on “coming back to center” and use tools like the Heart Sutra to help us get there, we are practicing being a witness in our lives. If we continue this practice, our consciousness will transform and become clearer and more stable over time.

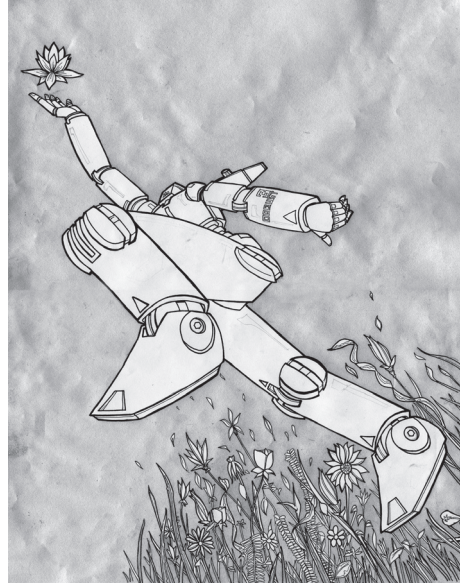
*“Just follow your heart.
That’s what I do.”*

- Napoleon Dynamite

Follow Your Heart

Most spiritual practices and self-improvement programs encourage us to follow our heart. But what *is* our heart? There are actually two levels to our heart: the *xin* (heart/mind) and the True Heart. The highest level of our heart is the True Heart, which is the part of ourselves that is connected to Tao, or the Source. The True Heart speaks to us through our *xin*, which contains our mental, emotional, and psychological capacities. However, the message can become distorted and unclear depending on the state of our *xin*. Our *xin* must be calm and clear in order to hear the messages of our True Heart. The True Heart is always trying to connect to the *xin* and guide it, but it takes a great deal of wisdom, energy, and clarity before this can happen.

The *xin*, or heart/mind, is very complex, but ultimately it is either self-obsessed (when the ego takes over) or aligned with the ultimate Truth (when it is connected to the True Heart). There are an infinite number of things our *xin* can be aligned with, for example: fame, money, attention, and power. In order to follow our True Heart, we first have to align our *xin* with the intention of finding our True Heart and pursuing



Graphic by Eric Collins

arête (excellence). When our *xin* is sincerely trying to find our True Heart, any mistakes or wrong turns will be transformed into learning experiences that bring us closer to finding our True Heart.

The powers of the *xin* and the True Heart are boundless and exceed the confines of time and space. The True Heart far supersedes any situational factors. Our material situation and others’ judgments do not affect its strength. Whether we are rich, poor, healthy, sick, etc. does not reveal the nature of our True Heart. All of the greatest spiritual leaders (i.e. Jesus, Buddha, Gandhi), have said that they are not concerned with the outward appearances or material status of their followers; they only care that their followers are seekers of the Truth. It is ironic that we must cultivate a connection with our hearts to find the Truth, and as we begin to uncover the Truth, we realize that it was in our hearts all along.

Since the True Heart cannot be seen or felt by the five senses, it remains an elusive part of ourselves that we are not always in touch with. The True Heart speaks in whispers, and this is why we

sometimes do not hear its messages. We may not even recognize the little voice inside of ourselves as being our True Heart, and we may think that it is karma, passing wishes, fantasy, or simply delusion. The only way we can begin to learn to tell the difference between the voice of our True Heart and mental clutter is to become as lucid as possible, take right action, and evaluate the results.

“It’s better to make a mistake with the full force of your being than to timidly avoid mistakes with a trembling spirit.”

- Dan Millman

Making Mistakes

Fear of making mistakes or being imperfect can sometimes be enough to deter us from following our hearts. Therefore, becoming comfortable with making mistakes is an essential component of growth. Assuming that our goal is to learn from our mistakes, we don’t need to be afraid when we are acting with integrity and doing what we believe is best for ourselves.

One of the rules of improv comedy is that it is perfectly acceptable to fail, as long as you admit it and embrace it. I went to an improv comedy workshop where one of the teachers asked us to throw our arms up in the air and proudly shout “I failed” every time we make a mistake. This forced us to be authentic and transparent, and it prevented us from feeling the shame and guilt that can arise when we mess up. Perhaps most importantly, it allowed us to laugh at ourselves and develop a sense of humor about the situation.

Taking Action

“Life demands right action if knowledge is to come alive.” - Dan Millman

We can take action...or not! The alternative to action is the illusion of comfort and the consequential stagnation, which always greet us with open arms. “Comfort” and stagnation will forever remain an attractive alternative to our feared friends: difficulty, change, and growth. We will meet no resistance if we spend our lives in a lukewarm state of consciousness. Borrowing one of John Gray’s terms, I will label this state of consciousness the “pastel zone.” If this were depicted visually, the pastel zone would constitute neutral pastel colors, while the vibrant zone would shine with a rainbow of brilliant colors.

People who wish to challenge the fears that pervade their consciousness and live full, meaningful lives will grow tired of living in the pastel zone. When we are ready to step outside of the pastel zone and into the vibrant zone, we often become restless and discontent. This is an ideal time to take conscious action in the direction of our dreams- to push ourselves to work for a life that is more congruent with who we are at our core.

Once we take a more conscious role in our lives, we begin to create ripples instead of just following waves. This means that we begin to *act on* the world rather than always being *acted upon*. An apparent paradox occurs: we gain greater effectiveness in our lives while humbly realizing that the universe is more vast and intelligent than we previously thought. Our fear warns us that everything will fall apart and spin out of control if we try to engage with this world more intensely. This is because we have well-established patterns that keep us “safe”, “comfortable”, and small. But if we wish to connect to Tao, or the Source, we cannot stay small forever. And as we continue to connect with the universe more profoundly and grow into a more expansive, loving self - a more True Self- we will feel the resistance of our patterns and the fears of our ego trying to keep us in “our place”. But we never truly become a player in our own lives until we leave our comfort zone and enter the vibrant zone, which resonates with the universe at a much higher frequency.

Being Present

“There are no ordinary moments.”
- Socrates, Peaceful warrior

Fear tends to keep us anxious about the future or stuck in our past experiences. In the book *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, the

main character goes through mindfulness training where his teacher continues to ask him: “Where are you?” The answer is always “here.” Then his teacher asks him, “What time is it?” The answer is always, “now.”

In the *Peaceful Warrior* movie, there is a moment where the main character, Dan, is standing in a park full of activity but he is absorbed in thought. He is therefore completely in his mind and not in the moment. With help from his teacher, he is jolted out of his thoughts and begins to look around with attentive eyes. Everything slows down, and each moment sparkles with radiance. As Dan watches everything moving in slow motion, he starts to notice the sun’s light bathing the people and the plants in its brightness. He also sees two lovers kissing, a woman playing sweetly with her dog, and children squealing in delight. After months of practicing this kind of mindfulness, he later begins to understand what his teacher had been telling him, “There are no ordinary moments.” When we are controlled by fear, we are unable to live in the present and realize our potential. We miss out on connecting to people, experiences, opportunities, a higher spiritual level (Tao or the Source) and ultimately to life itself. Our potential can be actualized at any moment in time; at any moment, we can infuse our lives with energy and attention, and thus bring value to even the most banal activity.

Openness

Let go

If we believe our heart is speaking to us and we decide to take action, it is best to try and let go of our attachment to other’s opinions of us, our expectations about the result, and our ideas of who we *think* we are and what we *think* we are capable of. This requires the humility to admit that we only see a small percentage of the truth, and what we see is not the ultimate Truth. Self-image is governed by the ego, and the eyes of the ego are too narrow to see the myriad of possibilities that the universe has to offer. The ego is not able to understand our unique place in the universe, because it is a mechanism of individual survival and does not allow for awareness of the whole.

Remaining attached to other’s expectations and to our self-imposed limitations serves our fear rather than our greater purpose. This is because, from a karmic perspective, our worries and fears are designed to block us from following our heart. If we truly believe that we want and need to do something because it coincides with our greater purpose, then that is all that matters. If our True Heart is a radio station that we can tune into, then our fears and doubts are only static.

“You will never again be able to keep your heart quiet. Even if you pretend to not have heard what it tells you, it will always be there inside you, repeating to you what you’re thinking about life and about the world.”

- Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

So, how can we get a stronger signal with the “radio station” and learn to disregard the static? To do this, we must learn to be a “good citizen of the universe”. This is a term that is used in “Defending Your Life” and it is an effective one. We cannot simply be self-serving and expect to achieve greatness. A self-serving attitude is generated by the ego and therefore does not lead us to self-actualization. When we leave this earth, all that will remain is the energy we contributed to our relationships and to the universe. We must always be aware of our relationship with others, and our relationship with the universe as a whole. What is our role? Does it need to shift? Are we willing to change it?



Illustration by Eric Collins
www.oobust.com

“The world is a waiting lover.” - Anonymous

We can begin to expand our role in the universe by engaging our curiosity. Embrace the world as you would a lover: with passion and openness. While we playfully embrace the world, we can also practice consciously listening to our hearts. This requires us to pay attention to our deepest fears and desires and to address them instead of repressing them or denying them. A bonus is that the more we process our thoughts and feelings, the easier it will be for us to aid others in processing theirs'. This is the path of the Bodhisattva.

“The heart that breaks open can contain the whole universe.” - Joanna Macy

In the quest to transform our fear and learn from it, the most challenging thing to do is to open up. This is because, by nature, fear is constricting and openness is expanding. The most difficult practices for someone who is afraid are: reaching out to others, imagining new possibilities, and trying new things. However, we will never be able to transcend our fear until we push ourselves to open up and do what we are afraid to do- assuming that our goal is growth. Our fears will always have power over us until we prove otherwise to ourselves. It can help to remember what was mentioned above: that fear is a visceral reaction whose singular purpose is self-protection. Therefore, any real transformation requires that we process our fears and shed them one by one, as snakes shed their skin. With time, the radiance and purity of our True Heart will begin to show itself as we become more connected to our own lives, to others, and to Tao. □