

# GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from

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## Fear and Courage

Her hand is trembling slightly on the brake strand of the rappel rope, and I am conscious that she is holding her breath in. She is staring past me and it's clear that "*this does not feel natural.*" We are at the top of Waterfall Mountain, learning to rappel. The physical setting is awesome – behind us the Appalachian mountain landscape falls away into the valley far below, and turkey vultures are soaring above. But she is seeing none of that. She is gripping the rope for all she is worth, and trying desperately to find a way to defy doing what I am asking her to do: "*Lean back, lose your balance, and feel the harness holding you.*" I see her searching for a reason to use to negotiate her way back in from that scary place out at the edge – a reason that she hopes I will accept. She also wants to do the rappel, because she wants my approval, and that of her friends watching, but she is really really scared.

He is facing down the darkening passage called the Commando Crawl in Glade Cave. His scout buddies are starting to crawl single file down the hole, and he is at a point of decision. That Challenge by Choice invitation I gave earlier is sounding mighty inviting right now; it would be really easy to back up and sit this one out, but something in him also knows that his self-respect is at stake. I have just offered my mini-lecture on tight places, deep breathing if you feel any "liver shiver" ("*In through the nose, out through the mouth.*"), and micro-movements to get through small squeezes. But even as I introduced the topic, I could see his jaw tighten, his breathing quicken, and his self-conscious glances to each side, and I knew this was the dragon he was going to have to slay today.

As an adventure guide, it is never my objective to deliberately terrify people. It is true, however, that we lead in physical settings that inherently invoke some legendary fears – steep, high exposed places, fast water, darkness and constriction. These can be quickly compounded when out in nature. Nothing quite gives beginning climbers the heebie jeebies like being high on the South Peak at Seneca Rocks with the wind blowing through their helmets. One feels exposed, small, vulnerable, and definitely out of the comfort zone. So if that is a reality of my work, can it also be an opportunity for us to learn something about ourselves, what frightens us, and how we let fear influence our actions?

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She completes the rappel, and as she unclips at the bottom, she is almost giddy with delight. I am busy affirming it as the joy of accomplishment, but we both know that some of it is just pent up adrenaline seeking an outlet. He comes through the Commando Crawl with mud on his helmet and a huge smile on his face. He is part relieved, and part unabashedly proud of himself for pushing through a fear. So we talk...

*“Anyone willing to admit that at some point during that activity, we felt a little fear?”* Several honest hands go up, so we affirm the willingness to acknowledge our weaknesses – not a common trait today, particularly among young men in our culture. I continue...

*“Mark Twain was an American humorist and author, but he was also a rather wise guy. He said this: **‘I have worried about a lot of things in my life, and most of them never happened.’** Any of us experience that? What were you worried about? Did you actually even name it? Did it in fact come to pass? Another way to think about what Twain is saying might be that fear is kind of like a fog – a cloud in front of you that you can’t see through. You can’t see your way to the other side of it. But when you reach out and push against that fog, what happens? Your hand goes **RIGHT THROUGH IT. THERE’S NOTHING THERE.**”*

*“But here’s the thing: you must push against the fog to discover this. If you turn and run from a fear, what happens the next time you face it? It has gotten **BIGGER!**”*

*But often, we let fear do just that – we let a fear stop us. We can’t see through the fog, so we stall, and end up giving up an opportunity to do something great – maybe accomplish some good in the world, or maybe slay some fear dragon in our lives. Moreover, when we let the fog stop us, we might actually be compounding that fear – the dragon grows. So my first encouragement today is, **‘Never let fear keep you from doing something great. Push against the cloud, and watch what happens.’**”*

Having guided people in scary environments for over thirty years, I have had many clients and students immobilized by the fog. People have sobbed at the top of the rappel, gotten belligerent and demanded to be taken back out of the cave, and exhibited a host of other fearsome and rationalizing behaviors. More than once, a parent has grabbed their child before they are 20 feet inside the cave entrance, turned them abruptly around and declared, *“We are not doing this.”* In these ways, we can even unwittingly bequeath our fears to the next generation. Another approach happens when I am out and about, maybe conversing, and the discovery is made that I climb mountains and explore caves for a living. *“You’re crazy to go up there/down there!”* (There, now you have an excuse to nurture your fears, because apparently, I am the one who is nuts).

*“So how do we muster the courage to go through something that is scary? Here is another powerful thought: **‘Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is the decision to do the hard thing in the presence of fear.’**”*

We sometimes make the mistake of thinking that people who do courageous things actually feel courageous. But this is rarely true. Courage is not a feeling – it is a decision despite a feeling. The feeling is fear, one that we can all relate to. But courage is not a feeling, and if you wait to do something great until you feel brave, you will be waiting forever. Courage is not and never will be a feeling. It is an act of the will based upon a conviction -- a stubborn belief. *“I must do it because it is the right thing to do – it is the great thing to do – and I am going to do it in spite of how I feel.”* So what we need in times of fear is simply a reason to do the thing that we stubbornly believe, and we set this WHY (decision) to work doing battle with our fear (feelings).

Another way of thinking about this is that courage per se does not really exist as an actual quality. Those looking on from outside might say that an act was courageous, but to the doer, there was no courage – there was only a duty to perform, a belief to uphold, a goal to accomplish.

Are there times other than in outdoor adventures that we allow fear to keep us from doing something great? If you have ever needed to ask a friend's forgiveness for saying something uncaring or cruel, or seen an opportunity to befriend some outcast when they are spurned by others, you have faced this dragon. And what keeps us stalled – is it not fear, of what others will think, or how we will be perceived or received? But courage is not the absence of fear – courage is the decision to do the hard thing in the presence of fear. My conviction is that I value this friendship, so I must go and apologize. Or I believe that each human being has value, so I must intervene if I see someone being marginalized. And making the will march in formation with our higher convictions and values instead of our feelings is always a growth toward personal maturity, and ultimately leadership. We will see later that leading is not mastering others, but inspiring and influencing them with our mastery of ourselves.

I have found in leadership that fear is our frequent opponent – fear of failure, of public opinion, or of our own weakness. As such, I believe that courage, the will to do some great thing in spite of fear, is actually the defining virtue of leadership, because its presence protects the emergence of all the others. We will not exercise creativity or project vision if we are controlled by fear. We will not risk truth-telling or attempt to build a team around shared purpose if we allow doubt to paralyze us. Courage properly cultivates/protects the soil in which all the other qualities of leadership can grow.

*“My basic principle is that you don't make decisions because they are easy, you don't make them because they are cheap, you don't make them because they are popular; you make them because they are right. Not distinguishing between rightness and wrongness is where administrators get into trouble.”* (Father Theodore Hesburgh)

Looked at through a spiritual lens, we are really replacing fear with faith – faith in what we believe to be true. These two will always be opposites. Where there is no faith, there is fear. And the answer to fear is always faith – stubborn belief in something we cannot see or give evidence to. Furthermore, the *amount* of faith we have is never the issue – what matters is the *object* of our faith. Is it objectively true, good, and worth our trust – trustworthy? All the faith in the world in a faulty line will not hold you when you fall. But a very little faith in a climbing rope is sufficient, because the objective reality is that the climbing rope can hold 6000 pounds, regardless of how you feel about it, or how skinny it looks. How hard you believe or how much you believe is never the issue; what is important is what it is that you are believing in.

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