

Quotations are taken from the transcripts of an international seminar at Coventry University, UK in April 2012 on the theme of Nonviolent Movements and the Barrier of Fear. The symposium was convened by the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies and the International Centre for Nonviolent Conflict.

Fear is a powerful emotion, and often we experience it for very good reasons – fear can alert us to threats and prepares our body to respond. However, fear can easily incapacitate and immobilise us, sap our vitality, prevent us from embracing life in all its fullness - living in fear can be like living in jail, it can kill you before you actually die.

Fear can also act as a catalyst for action, producing a sense of outrage or indignation and a determination to act, in the awareness that if nothing is done the threat will overpower us. Threats can be relatively distant - like nuclear destruction and environmental catastrophe - or more immediate, like abuses of your human rights.

The big question for activists is: what is it that people need to enable them to step into their fear, and take action, rather than withdraw into their privatised protective shell?

What are we afraid of?

In 2013 I was observing a Palestinian demonstration, and encountered various forms of fear. The soldiers began firing tear-gas and rubber bullets, and I feared that I might be hit or injured. There was also a fear that my presence might be caught on camera and, if identified, I might face problems leaving and entering Israel in future. My experience in Palestine chimes with the work of Manuel Garreton, who researched fear experienced by activists in Latin America during the period of military dictatorship. Garreton identified two types of fear; the first occurs when you feel insecure, and Garreton called this the 'darkened room'. It can be very broad and long term, and contrasts with the fear which is specific and identifiable - the 'dog that bites'. This distinction informed the observations of an Egyptian activist speaking at an international 'fear symposium' held in Coventry, UK in 2012:

“All of us have logical reasons to be afraid, but I have illogical reasons because I am afraid of the future. ... Every time you expect something bad to happen, the good things don't happen in my society. I am afraid for my children when they go out to play. My friends think I am very brave because when there is risk I am the first to go to the front. I am not afraid of the known risk but afraid of the unknown risk.”

Fearlessness and courage

Experienced activists make a clear distinction between courage – which means acknowledging your fears and trying to overcome them or deal with them – and fearlessness, which is the absence of any fear whatsoever. Another 'fear symposium' participant cautioned:

“We shouldn't expect people to have infinite courage, and the process of casting off fear doesn't mean that there is no fear left. A person with no fear at all would be similar to the person who cannot feel pain, and people who cannot feel pain can suffer hideous injuries ...”

Another participant drew on a similar distinction when making an analogy between engaging in protest action and rock-climbing:

“There is the assumption that people who do a particularly difficult ascent must be fearless – but what they need is the skill and the confidence to know how to act in a particular situation, which isn't the same thing at all as being fearless. And I think this comes across in a lot of good

nonviolent training – training people how to act sensibly in difficult situations.”

Cultivating courage

There are all kinds of ways that the negative impact of fear can be managed. These can be divided into four categories: 1) Acknowledgement, 2) Organisational culture, 3) Emotional management, 4) Planning and training.

1. Acknowledgement

There is no way fear can be addressed if it isn't acknowledged. By acknowledging your fears you can share them with others, and through sharing, activists can start to analyse the nature of their fears and begin to explore ways of addressing them.

2. Organisational culture

The nature of your group or organisation can have a radical impact on how people respond to and address their fears:

- People are more likely to be prepared to address their fears if their participation in an organisation or movement is valued.
- The military knows that acts of heroism aren't performed for 'freedom' or 'democracy' but for friends and comrades. Similarly, it is vital that movements build bonds of trust and friendship, encouraging solidarity that can strengthen activists' will to face their fears.
- One way to contribute to this sense of solidarity is through 'rituals' and celebrations. Studying the US civil rights movements, Charles Payne referred to the significance of the mass meetings, church services, and music that was integral to African-American culture. 'The music operated as a kind of litany against fear. Mass meetings offered a context in which the mystique of fear could be chipped away.'
- Everyone has different comfort levels, and organisers need to involve people from across a wide spectrum, and to recognise that everyone's contribution is valid and important. One of the symposium participants urged:

“You need different levels and modes of participation – not everyone is going to want to go down to the square for direct action and risk a beating. There has to be other ways of involvement.”

3. Emotional management

Emotions are never singular – fear might be dominant in certain circumstances, but it is always accompanied by other feelings. One way to undermine fear then is by identifying associated, more affirming, emotions - much of the advice in this section can be read as means to strengthen the spirit of hope within activists. 'Hope' is a powerful counter to the impotency that can be fuelled by fear. Relinquishing hope is to give way to despair; to despair is to betray the future. Even where hope is weak, people can still be encouraged to face their fears on the basis of their values, morality or belief system. For example - I may not believe that I will see the world without war, but it does not affect my commitment to the values on which that dream was founded.

4. Planning and preparation

Robert Helvey has focused on the importance of preparation and planning as a way of dealing with the

effects of fear in relation to nonviolent direct action. Helvey advises:

- Plan actions to avoid engaging the opponent in their own terms. (for example, organise surprise demonstrations and disperse quickly, declaring a ‘victory’ before the opponent can respond).
- Plan actions carefully so as to minimise the risk of surprise or panic.
- Provide participants with guidelines for action, to promote the level of discipline awareness and self control necessary for a coordinated action under pressure.
- Aim to reduce the fear of the opponent.
- Leadership that inspires trust and confidence is vital. As one of the participants at the Coventry symposium observed:

“In a situation where the riot police have jumped from their vehicles – crucial here is leadership. Someone has to break that fear, stand their ground and create calmness among others. That is leadership. Some people manage to overcome their own fear – once you have one person doing that another can follow – they are some of the key things to break the crowd panic.”

Risk assessment

One element of any preparation and training for an action involving some kind of threat to the participants should be a form of risk assessment. In the words of one of the Coventry symposium participants,

Take the example of the dog that bites – which is the dog, when does it bite, why does it bite... how to react when it is about to bite, what can we do after it has bitten me? There are ways not to overcome fear but to manage it. Break it down – what are the entry points and what is our plan? ...You need to assess risks, assess vulnerabilities ... even be prepared to stop because the risk is too high. Planning is so important.

Any planning process for an action should also factor in the significant role that might be played by networks of support, that can act as crucial ‘safety nets’ for those facing threats. At one level, this can mean having good [legal support](#), but it can also involve international solidarity networks. One of the campaigners who attended the ‘fear symposium’ gave examples of the significance of international networks:

Thinking about networks and support and undermining the pillars of support for oppressors - ‘the world is watching you’ - sends a very strong message to the oppressors. Many police officers have said to me after releasing me, ‘I didn’t do anything bad to you, so please don’t put my name on the internet.’

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