

CHAPTER 1

Fear



“Courage is knowing what not to fear.”

–Plato

AS AN ADULT, you’ve forgotten that taking risks and falling down was how you learned, everything. Now, you don’t risk. You protect the image of competence, looking good and, fitting in. For many, a point comes when playing it safe is dissatisfying. You tap into your courage and will. You choose to act, to move out of your comfort zone, and pursue your new dream. As if awakening from a long slumber, you are giddy because your vision is so compelling. Ideas surface fast and furious. You feel the adrenaline pulse. Then, you make choices so far out of the norm that you separate from your group, you’re exposed, vulnerable and maybe even terrified. At this moment, your original hypothesis is proven right. The risk to learn and dream and reach for the stars is dangerous. You pull back and step off the path into a safe zone, away from other people and the visibility of your compelling dream, that you likely abandoned. You build your emotional barriers that prevent being and feeling vulnerable. Mental blinders to taking the

risk, especially interpersonal risk, are the habits you develop. Those habits stop you from ever perceiving an opportunity for change, allowing your life to continue to unfold, secure.

I know your experience as leaders and coaches has surfaced some or all of this internal scenario. You are standing on a plateau and Earth's gravity has you firmly in place. It's an intimate experience not usually shared with others. You must rely on external symptoms to recognize what may be occurring for yourself. Everyone becomes a mirror reflecting your private, internal experience. Some familiar symptoms people report include frustration, disappointment, apathy, fatigue, annoyance, anxiety, anger, deference, addiction (work, food, sex, alcohol, drugs), loneliness, sadness, and depression. These symptoms are real. And, as symptoms, they do not tell the entire story. Each person is so much more than their external circumstances. Your dualistic judgments about good and bad, right and wrong, useful or harmful, and your sense of being powerless or power-filled keep you on the plateau.

In a quiet moment, most of you hear some inner voice that initiates your trek away from the plateau. That voice whispers ever so softly, "maybe, just maybe someone will see me and invite me to remember that I am more than this circumstance and these... associated feelings. I want something else."

The moments when I feel the deepest gratitude for the coaching profession occur when a client allows the vulnerability of not knowing. Be the client as you read these pages. Begin to notice the pain from tolerating the mirage of your life built on the idea of security. An inner tension builds to a point where you no longer accept the way of living that places safety and security above your innately creative life force. Even the most prideful C-Suite executive or a highly satisfied and successful parent, or college graduate or, truthfully, any human

being, awakens to the hollowness of achievement when there is no underlying purpose or greater good to prop it up. I remember the moment in 1995 when I realized that every achievement I set out to produce in my adult life had occurred and I felt the hollowness. I felt flat and bored. I owned my home, was a well-respected executive leader of a public company, engaged with a wide circle of friends and community interests, experienced many global travel adventures and yet, felt that something was missing. This startling realization initiated my personal examination of me; my essential, unique qualities. I began to see that I was behaving based on what everyone else wanted me to be, thinking that by fulfilling the expectations that others held out for me and the associated rewards, that I'd be happy and satisfied. I had financial security and some fun for sure, but was I satisfied and happy? No.

So many myths and stories express this archetypal journey of self-refinement and wanting more out of life because it is the universal human development path. It doesn't matter what context of self-development you choose whether it be personal, professional, spiritual—the aforementioned symptoms of an unfulfilled existence apply to all of those. The experience is inclusive, meaning it does not discriminate based on gender, culture, economic status, or any other criteria you identify with. In this way, the moment of the plateau is perfectly normal. Rather than fatal, it signals that you are alive and ready to move beyond secure and flat toward living sovereign. Sovereignty means to self-reign in old English. Today, the word is a more modern view of self-responsibility. A state of being, sovereignty is based upon awareness and knowledge of your authenticity, values, and principles as the foundation for choosing the relationship you want with the conditions of your life. If you seek more agility, resilience, and integrity in your life, choose to engage

from sovereignty as your resource. Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe expressed this idea brilliantly with this proverb, “*One of the truest tests of integrity is its blunt refusal to be compromised.*” Living sovereign tests your integrity with choosing, inside-out, from your core self.

On your path to become an adult, you engage in professional endeavors. The practice of leading is an endeavor for being useful to another, creating a compelling vision, and focusing perspective and attention toward producing something valued by others. Ideas transform through people who are creating and learning together to manifest satisfying experiences and results. Unifying dialogue creates awareness that leads to insights that fuel people to choose new ways forward. Whether that new way is a mindset, a method, or an alternative action, a breakthrough occurs. Leading and witnessing this flow is an experience of renewal. Courage to shake off the doldrums and pursue what is uplifting starts to build. I know because it happened for me when I began to live sovereign.

When you experience a plateau, you are wondering if you are vital in your work. You question whether you are choosing beyond your comfortable habits and practices toward your aspiration to serve. As the question arises, it is easy to believe you are immune; after all, you are an accomplished leader. You feel you should be the role model for others; showing them an ideal picture of someone stretching to contribute, working toward balance, living into your full potential and satisfied with life. Then one day, you remember the old saying, “what you resist, persists.” That day you realize, you are living on a plateau that doesn’t match your vision for the world. That dream is real and vital, and the only thing in your way is your courage to continue becoming. You leave behind achievement as the goal in favor of spontaneous self-trust that invites others into

co-creative relationships. You learn to balance competition with collaboration.

I was invited to engage with a chief marketing officer who was highly successful. He had been part of one company that achieved success and was sold. He then started a second company that was likely to be acquired and he was recognized in the national press as a member of the top twenty-five young (under 40) marketing leaders. During the first conversation this leader became quiet for a long moment and then said, “I don’t know if anything I’ve done is real and I am stressed out all the time. It’s hurting my family and I don’t know what to change or how.” All of the outer success was certainly real and true, but came at a personal, internal cost that was too great. The self-learning available in our coaching partnership revealed a set of core values that his professional choices were conflicting with. This had piled up to a point that his body and his heart had to stop pushing so hard. He literally couldn’t keep going with the same speed and intensity; it was harming his very being. It turned out that his value of responsibility was overriding other values that he previously used to fuel his creativity, insight, and joy.

When we collected some feedback to support his development plan, one of the startling findings was that his team found him competitive and controlling. This was the opposite of his self-image. Driven by responsibility to be sure the team was shielded from politics and velocity of change in a growth company, he had shut them out without realizing that the consequence was a loss of trust, collaboration, engagement, and connection to the overall purpose of the organization. At a key moment that he needed his team to be high performing, his achievement-oriented focus had produced the opposite outcome. This young leader did learn to look up and out and saw the unintended impact of choices and decisions

that conflicted with his true self. As he began to reclaim his core strengths and qualities, he rebuilt his relationship with himself, his family, and his team. The acquisition was successful and he's gone on to create a third company, more values-aligned and congruent with his authentic presence and vision. He found his way off the plateau and restored an internal guidance system to balance his life on his terms, inside-out.

Being on a plateau is normal. It is a stage of a life well-lived that signals a cycle change, an opportunity to evolve by listening, learning, and choosing in new ways. It is likely difficult for high achievement-oriented people to hear that self-awareness and consciousness of other viewpoints and perspectives must be a practice. A lifelong practice that never becomes a habit (one can't put this level of empathy and awareness on autopilot). The reward for sustaining our energy to be acutely aware is that we break through our plateaus, deepening our self-knowledge and self-trust. The dualistic thinking inherent in ambition and achievement that orients you toward interpreting situations as right and wrong can evolve into something greater. Awareness opens the door to rooms in yourself you have never visited and now have the power of choice to consider entering. As you examine what is possible by tapping into more of who you are, a sense of unity emerges. To live sovereign is to accept and act upon your inner authority to choose the relationship you want with the conditions of your life.

The fear that stops you from choosing a new path is an illusion yet so very palpable, present, and real in your mind, body, and heart. Advertisers and the media know all too well how to engage you and sustain your attention on fear in various forms. The fear of missing out is rampant in today's society. Its grip is so strong that a duality perpetuates that makes "more than" and "less than" evaluations

of people rational. You want recognition as a person who is at the top of your game, well-regarded for your work, a humble and ambitious contributor in the world. You are always walking through a revolving door after something outside of you for the good of the chase. That something has your emotional and mental investment as if it is a holy grail. While on that hero's journey, you are blind to what is occurring in your world. At least until the rubber band holding your illusion in place loses its shape and purpose.

The fear of not being important stimulates the pursuit of knowledge and the status that often comes with choosing the company you keep. The fear of other peoples' opinions motivates constant action, filling a hole you sense and can't seem ever to achieve or experience enough to feel whole. Emotional barriers in the form of assumptions, beliefs, biases, and preferences arise. You control for extreme risk and lose any connection to spontaneity. Your self-trust vanishes, replaced by the perception of others as your reality. The suffering you feel in the form of fatigue, impatience, pain, and anger enslaves your choices. You gravitate toward what is familiar and comfortable, numbing yourself to the experience with drugs, alcohol, sex, extreme sport, and acquisition of stuff. The hole remains. The fear remains.

Perception is not reality. Perception is a myth that sustains ambition and chasing a destination that is not yours to pursue. When perception becomes a truth that you adopt without question, you are living out of integrity. Failure to pause and determine if the facts of a situation match your direct experience with what matters most results in unsatisfying outcomes. Billionaire and philanthropist Warren Buffett said, "once born, the only thing life ever gives you is feedback." The only thing. You experience each day with an inevitable necessity to survive. Having learned how to survive, you are

restless, sensing something more is supposed to occur. The future projection of what could become based on your experience keeps you subjugated and suppressed. It is no longer relevant or useful to the present. You receive feedback through these two lenses and fail to claim your unique and artesian resource, your sovereign self. You continue to fight against the plateau, which only extends the time you stand still, captured by a drive to perform. You are out of balance with the natural rhythm that is the most enlivening and comes from within, from your essential qualities.

The alternative to the hero's journey is, first and foremost, an inner path. The moment you notice you are standing on the plateau is a present moment filled with an acute awareness that motivates more profound listening. You become aware in your mind that logic is fuzzy, decision-making is slower or perhaps even stalled, and you are obsessed with reinvention. Reinventing your reality is a terrific way to defer facing your emotional barriers from outdated beliefs and blinding mental attachments. You start to notice your heart filled with doubt, moments of sadness that sneak up and surprise you, exaggerated annoyance, and edginess with everyone, including yourself. The last stage arrives just before a severe illness or an accident. Your body is fatigued, lethargic, and no amount of sleep restores you. Addictions of any kind start to have priority in your choices; these are self-sacrificing and judgmental choices.

Judgment is a word that often evokes mistrust and disgust. You hope others do not perceive you as a judgmental person or a person who judges another without merit. The inevitable truth; judgment is a human trait that is undeniable. What gets you in trouble is your habit of reacting based on conclusions that assess a situation based on the past or future projection. At this moment on the planet, integrity and response-agility are challenging to embody. When the

stakes are the highest, you must choose to slow down in the moment, pause your habitual reactions, and listen into the situation more deeply. These are the moments that call for a practice of unconditional curiosity. Questions without a condition are those you don't know the answer to and are not fishing for a solution to affirm what you know. Genuine curiosity wants to learn what another person perceives and experiences. You will often be surprised to discover that your curiosity brought to the surface what at first appeared to be conflicting viewpoints along with many common and aligned ideas. Unconditional curiosity evokes wonder, opportunity, maybe even the possibility for something useful and enlivening. When is the last time you asked a question you did not know the answer to for the pure intent and pleasure of learning from and with another person?

Dialogue that unifies is what you need to meet the challenges society faces today. You can replace negotiation based on leveraging a position. Strengthen your engagement with a commitment to be willing to be disturbed. Leadership consultant, author, and sage, Margaret Wheatley penned a series of essays in the 1970s. Her premise, which you will do well to experiment with, is that when you are willing to be disturbed by another person's perspective, you are privileged to be at choice. The choice to be curious and tenacious to learn is what drives change. Every conversation that builds unity is a source of a breakthrough. The combination of what has been from two or more points of view, recombined in new ways that meet the world, as it is, to discover what is decent and respectful.

As a leader, you start from a place of listening. Listen with a firm intent to learn through an open exchange and open attention. Truly perceive another person on their terms. Maybe you recall a moment in your life when you spoke and your favorite parent or

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mentor finally saw you as a peer, an equal adult, fully resourceful and capable. Allow that memory to surface for yourself and breathe into the memory until you feel the emotion, the physical sensation of recognition, and the mental knowledge you no longer need to prove anything. This unconditional love moment arrives in you, as self-love, acknowledged, and championed by a person who is the most important in your life. You experience a moment of belonging. It is as essential to you as your heartbeat. Use this feeling or visualization as a springboard to empathize with those with whom you work or lead, and how much they need that same acknowledgment to be seen and heard from you.

Reflect on the challenging and courageous conversations that must occur now if we are to restore the ability to thrive in our society. See, acknowledge, and rise to the opportunity that every leader has—the choice to create an environment of belonging as equal, entirely whole, resourceful human beings together as one community. There are many brave and generous people who volunteer time and write checks. Invite a fresh conversation that examines what is underneath the suffering and the systems that hold the suffering in place. When we invite change, we activate creative, critical thinking focused on root causes. A more holistic approach has the potential for laser focus at the source to eliminate what creates the suffering. When we discuss racial equity, for instance, we must consider the legal and public policy systems that begin by defining the non-dominant populations, as less than a whole person eligible for the full rights of the citizenry. When we contemplate our climate emergency, we must examine the cause and effect connections in our use of planetary resources beyond the individual in current time to view the collective and cumulative impacts, especially on elements we currently do not place a commercial value upon, such as the air and

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atmosphere. Human trafficking generates exploitation, especially our children, stealing their youth and our future as a society to satisfy an addiction that has its source in our poor management of community health and fundamental respect and decency.

You and I may no longer stand in fear. The need is far too great. Transcend your fear by channeling your attention toward innate creativity. Join the effort to make our social progress, from the source of the suffering, priority one to paint a healthy canvas for our society on the planet.

Chapter 1 - Key Ideas to Explore

- Each person is so much more than their external circumstances.
 - Your dualistic judgments about good and bad, right and wrong, useful or harmful and your sense of being powerless or power-filled keep you on a plateau, stuck.
 - In a quiet moment, most of you hear some inner voice that initiates your trek away from the plateau.
 - A question for inquiry: “What is my attachment to and belief about the safety of this plateau that is more compelling than the opportunity to pursue and receive what I want next?”
- The archetypal journey of human development is inclusive, meaning it does not discriminate based on gender, culture, economic status, or any other criteria you identify.
 - The moment of the plateau is perfectly normal and rather than fatal, it signals that you are alive and ready to move beyond secure and flat toward vital sovereignty
 - A state of being, sovereignty is based upon awareness and knowledge of your authenticity, values, and principles as the foundation for choosing the relationship you want with the conditions of your life.
 - A question for inquiry: “What choices in how I relate to my life and work have integrity for me and fuel agility and resilience for me now?”

- The fear that stops you is an illusion yet so very palpable, present, and real in your mind, body, and heart.
 - You are blind to what is occurring in your world until the rubber band holding your illusion in place loses its shape and purpose.
 - Genuine curiosity wants to learn what another person perceives and experiences. What is the wonder, opportunity, and maybe even the possibility for something useful and enlivening?
 - A question for inquiry: “When is the last time you asked a question you did not know the answer to for the pure intent and pleasure of learning from and with another person?”