

Fear and Shamanism

The single greatest obstacle.

"I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it is gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.

Only I will remain."

--Frank Herbert "Dune"

We all exist in the shadow of our fears. We have learned fear, we know fear and we are comfortable with it. Fear is a vine, which has grown up with each of us. The roots are deep, the leaves healthy and we cannot fathom the reach of its tendrils. Our lives are led in reaction to fear, our choices colored by anxiety and our thoughts dogged by apprehension. Fear is the greatest obstacle to knowledge and understanding of ourselves. Fear is woven into the tapestry of our lives. Human beings took what nature gave them as instinct and have grown it up into an essential part of the modern human equation. We have intellectualized fear, creating a plethora of psychosis. We have even made fearing being afraid an issue of human character. We cannot think of an aspect of human behavior or emotion that does not have fear woven into it: fear of failure, fear of success, fear of love, or hate, fear of the unknown, or that we may know too much. Since shamans first crawled out of the mud they have recognized fear as the single greatest obstacle to their practices.

The fears we learn as children stay with us and operate all our lives. We inherit a worldview filled with fears and anxiety. We learn to behave in certain ways because we are afraid not to, and we learn not to behave in certain ways because we are afraid of the consequences. Most human beings exist in a balance between fear and fear. The shaman's task is to unravel those fears, or any human being that wants a clearer understanding of his or herself and a richer view of the world in which they live can do the same.

So what is fear exactly? Fear is the general and you are the foot soldier being marched around in a little circle. When fear is in control, your life is lived in reaction to events, there is no real proactive control of your own destiny.

We cannot over estimate the part fear plays in all our decisions. When you begin looking back at the decisions you have made in your life, if you are honest with yourself, you will find fear as one of the great motivating forces in your choices and actions. Seeing that isn't always easy, some times you have to move back through dozens of choices and events, but eventually you will see a choice that acted as an ignition point for this line of events that was based in fear. As human beings we don't like to do that, after all, we want to appear strong and capable. Why? We're afraid of appearing weak.

Shamans know that fear works in tandem with reason to prevent us from seeing either the world or ourselves in a larger context. If you don't believe that simply look around at people who have a noticeably narrower world-view than you. You will see or realize they have a lot more to be afraid of in their world than you do. The fear they have narrows their focus, prevents them from being fluid or accepting change. Since in the shamanic world fluidity, change, and an expanded world-view are paramount, eliminating fear is essential for growth. So let's cut to the chase, how does one control or eliminate fear from life? Confronting each fear one by one would take a life time and beyond that a battle with fear will only convince your reason that there really must be something to be afraid of and it will help create even more fear.

Making a somewhat desperate end-run around this problem, shamans figured out that by tracking back through human fear they could find the big one, which, if eliminated, would make the most difference. Needing to understand themselves and their world they sought outside its normal parameters, they flew in the face of death and learned something very important to the way of the shaman. They found that death itself was the big enchilada. Coming back from that doorway to eternity they discovered that coming face to face with their own physical annihilation had brought them to a place of profound detachment. The intimate knowledge and acceptance of their own deaths had erased fear.

It sounds so simple, but it is not. No better way has been found and no more difficult way can be imagined. We should always pay homage with respect to those early pioneers of the human spirit, who like some today, simply had to know or die in the attempt. They forced heart, mind, nerve, and sinew past the borders of human endurance, beyond this world and into the unknown. Many who went never came back, but those that did had learned to laugh in the face of their own death, because they had seen directly into the heart of intent. They have existed in every generation and have worked without fear of their own death. They were stoned in ancient Rome, burned in the Middle Ages by their Christian priests, shunned in the age of reason, but they are still here. They will even survive the New Age and the mental flogging of modern psychology.

The fear of our own personal death is the greatest fear for human beings. You cannot take a reasonable approach, everyone can say, "Oh yes, of course I know I will die someday." You have to **know** your own death, intimately, you must feel it in your heart and hold it close to you as your best adviser. So how does that help with the rest of this house of fear we have built for ourselves? The short answer is perception. By viewing your life through the eyes of your own death you will see all the fears and the emotions triggered by them falling away. Anger, hate, indecision and the big one, self-pity, will be brought into a new perspective; you will shed your current world-view like a snake sheds its skin.

Fear is your greatest enemy; never under estimate its hold on your life.