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PRIVATE FEARS AND PUBLIC FAILURE

Kathryn K. Logan

Fear: (f_r), n. A distressing emotion caused by an impending pain, danger, evil, etc., or by the illusion of such.¹

Challenge: (chal_inj), n., v. A call or summons to engage in any contest, as of skill, strength, etc.; to make or issue a challenge.²

A child does not learn to achieve her greatest potential out of fear. We all know that a nurturing environment that encourages, praises, and guides a child, enables those youthful individuals to explore and accomplish their best. While we strive to do this in preschool and elementary school, something unfortunately happens during adolescence and it reaches a climax in college. During these crucial years, when the cultivation of individual knowledge and values reaches its highest peak, a great tragedy occurs. Before stepping out into a world we are supposed to embrace, we have learned to fear our potential, thus losing power over ourselves. When we lose our powerful individual ability, society inevitably fails.

After five years of college, and a month away from graduation, I have become aware of a teaching tool that cripples many of us before we embark on our dreams. It is fear in all its components: fear of failing, fear of competition, fear of not pleasing our professors, our bosses, our parents, our friends, or even ourselves. Residing in all of us, fear unfortunately becomes magnified all too often

within the classroom. One professor did not understand why students agonized over their grades. Well, today, grades have become an even greater standard of success or failure. We use this standard to measure both our capabilities and ourselves, and so when we cannot reach this standard, we think we fail. It seems hypocritical to set a standard and wonder why students are bent on achieving it.

By setting standards, society molds individuals; through fear it controls them. The other day I began another class. I am excited because I know I will learn a lot, but one underlying problem exists. Inside the professor's toolbox I find fear. Rather than serving as a challenge, an extensive syllabus attempts to weed out the weak ones (the students who fear they cannot achieve those standards), and throw all of the strong ones into a competitive arena, from which they anxiously judge themselves and others. An extensive agenda should serve as a guide and challenge, rather than fear bait, but how do educators achieve that? Well, maybe by overcoming their personal fear of not being good enough.

Truly, there is something valuable in competition because we strive excellence in achieving those standards, thus improving ourselves. Unfortunately, fear is used more often to achieve those standards, rather than summoning a skill. Instead of challenging us to tap into our true selves, giving birth to new ideas and ways of thinking, we give up our individuality and gain commonality instead. We all seek a grade that satisfies, so we can move on to other things, like being ourselves. Too bad we could not have been ourselves all along.

So why do we use and accept this fear tool so often? Well, it is ingrained in us. We mostly identify ourselves through the standards of others, rather than with those unique standards we set for ourselves. We all project what we feel, and unfortunately we project fear quite often. The present war with Iraq, and America's involvement, stems from fear. The Bush administration tells us that Saddam has weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that threaten our national security. Saddam uses fear to repress and control his own people—forcing men into battle, while holding their wives and children hostage. No wonder society is unraveling, and world leaders have lost control within the international arena. 

Endnotes

1. Random House.
2. Ibid.