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Fear is Good.

By Danee Rudy

Don't believe me? Chances are you know someone who doesn't have enough fear. There is a not so scientific name for those people- we call them idiots. People who lack fear do some pretty stupid things- they are dangerous to themselves and others. Fear gives us insight into what could happen if things go wrong. Imagine not having this insight! Fear is what makes us take precaution. Fear is why we wash our hands, use our seat belts, look both ways before crossing the road, and tell our children not to run with scissors. Fear is why we obey the law, and fear is why most people have not broken as many bones as Evil Knievil.

Fear keeps us alive! When we were too young to have a good, well developed, fear on our own it was our parent's fear that kept us from harms way. As humans we fear all sorts of things- pain, sadness, embarrassment, financial loss, and even fear of the unknown. There could be no order to society without these fears. Repercussions would mean nothing. Morals would have no value to us. Fear gives meaning to life.

To take it a step further, fear is fun- yes, that's right- FUN! Fear is what makes amusement parks and movies exciting. Fear gives us a rush. Fear puts the thrill into kayaking, bungee jumping, roller coaster riding, learning about new cultures, dating, dancing, karaoke, mountain climbing, tree climbing, hiking, and even horse back riding. Without a smidge of fear, jumping a five foot jump on horseback would be boring. Watching a three day event would be reduced to observing the rider's technical merit and maybe the horse's biomechanics- we would no longer feel the 'wow' effect of witnessing a horse jumping out of chest deep water, or boldly galloping off the edge of an embankment.

Alright, so maybe it isn't actually the fear, but rather the overcoming of fear, that is the exhilarating part, but without fear there would be nothing to overcome in the first place. Words like bold, brave, daring, and courageous would have no meaning without their antonym, fear.

So why is fear so troubling? Too much of any good thing is usually bad. Too much food, too much exercise, too much praise, and too much free time can get us into trouble. Even people who win the lottery often find it a curse in the end. When we let our fears grow into something uncontrollable we become inhibited by them. Once we hit the point of panic it does not matter how 'good' the outcome was- all we really remember is the emotion.

Good experiences don't matter.

Often times well meaning friends think that if you survive a situation the scariness will dissipate. If the outcome is that you had a really great time and felt good about yourself than that is true. But if your friends drag you on a trail ride and you were in terror the whole time, that is all you take home with you- terror. You won't remember how great the view was, how much you accomplished in someone else's eyes, or how calm your horse was. You will only remember your emotions. I believe it was Maya Angelou who said they won't remember what you said or what you did- they will remember how you made them feel. This is so very true and it exemplifies how the human mind works- emotion trumps all.

Pretend a friend was trying to talk you into cliff jumping- you worked up enough nerve to put on a parachute and walk to the edge to look over, but with no intention of jumping. Just as you start to lean out, your friend pushes you! Not hard enough to push you off, but darn close. Would you look over again? Not with your friend standing there you wouldn't!!! You would probably jump in the car and drive home trembling and cursing the whole way! You weren't hurt and your life was not in danger (yet!) but you sure will respond like it was. When friends say lets go for a trail ride and somehow convince you to go with it isn't so different. Especially if they all say, "let's gallop up this hill," without asking you first or giving you time to think about it. You may succeed or you may fail, but either way all you will get out of it is being horrified and never trusting your friends again. Even if you did the most awesome thing you've ever done on horseback or otherwise- if you are truly scared than you get nothing but more fear from the experience!!!

So what emotion do you *want* to practice? You could practice only calmness

and security by riding only on good days, in the indoor arena, when it is not windy, and there is no other horses being ridden, at no more than a trot, and when your best friend is there to watch- just in case. If you are getting back in the saddle for the first time after a ten year sabbatical this may be a good idea for awhile, but it is very limiting to the average person. So instead of practicing calmness and confidence, you end up practicing worry and paranoia as you attempt to make the stars to align so you can get on your horse. This is very defeating and not likely to make you feel good about yourself. You will spend more days failing than succeeding. If that is where you need to start, that is fine, but you need a plan to move forwards.

The daily goal should be progress. Tiny itty-bitty specks of progress are fine. Even more important than the progress itself is to recognize your progress. For you to know how far you've come, you first need to know exactly where you are starting. That way every small bit of process can be noticed and given its deserved credit.

Finding the edge of your fear.

So when does your fear just barely start to happen? Maybe you already know you are afraid of the canter, but at what point does the fear just start to surface. Does just thinking about cantering start your fear? Maybe it is when you shorten your reins and start to prepare for the canter. Possibly cantering is okay until it starts to get a little faster, or when the horse feels off balance during a turn. Maybe you can canter fine by yourself but not with a group of riders. Pinpoint exactly what moment fear starts to emerge. Once you have found that point, get cozy there. If just thinking about the canter makes you freeze up, than think about it a lot. If preparing to canter gets your nerves going, than shorten your reins, sit tall, get your aids ready... and then lengthen your reins and walk again. If you are okay until your horse speeds up and feel powerless to slow him down, than canter five steps and stop. Walk a lap or two and than canter five steps again. Don't let anyone tell you it will teach your horse bad habits. In your case you would rather him stop than go too fast, and since when is practicing transitions bad anyways. If later you have to kick like mad for a sixth step, at least you will feel safe!!

If you are afraid of working with your horse's hind legs than find the specific point on your horse that starts to make you uneasy. Can you brush your horse's barrel? His flank? His haunches? Stifle? Hock? What about on the other side? If you realize that anything below the stifles causes fear for you now, than you can be proud of yourself next month when you can easily brush his hocks. Otherwise, all you would know is that you are still too afraid to pick up his feet. Groom as far back and down as you can and still feel safe. Find the edge of

your fear and set up camp. Eventually (and usually not as long as you think!) the edge will move and you can follow it. When you can walk right up to your horse, run your hand across his back and the whole way down his leg without anxiety kicking in, than you are ready to ask the horse to shift his weight onto his other leg. When that is going well, ask him to pick up his foot- one inch. You don't need to hold his foot yet. Just get used to the feel of asking him to raise it. I will say right now that you are safer the closer you stand. If you are trying to stand way out and lean over you are in a perfect position to get whacked- maybe even in the nose. Make sure you are cozy standing with your shoulder right up against your horse before you pick up his foot. You may get a toe stepped on, and his leg could 'kick' yours, but at such close range he won't build any power or inertia to kick you with.

If a horse is truly bad with his hind legs we will often loop a rope around their fetlock to pick up the foot. Once they settle into it, than we step up under them and hold it up. If your horse is bad about his feet and you are petrified to handle them, find someone knowledgeable to help. There is no need to give your fears reason to grow. But if your friend can walk right in there and pick them up with no hesitation, than you need to make a program of getting comfortable handling his legs.

Never do anything you don't feel ready for, but do slowly work towards it. Riding on the edge of fear can be fun and rewarding as you expand your box and try new things. Doing something you don't feel ready for won't feel good and therefore is of no beneficial use. Keep pressing on, but do so slowly. For some people, just thinking about going to the barn is enough to induce fear. If that is you than practice getting ready to go to the barn- put on your riding clothes and grab your keys. Than go put your flannel pants back on and watch a training DVD, a horse show on RFD-TV or YouTube, old video tapes of you riding in your youth, or the Black Stallion, or The Man from Snowy River. Heck, do that every night for a week by the weekend you'll be itching to at least pet your horse.

If ground work is great, but getting on is when the dreams turn to nightmares, put a saddle on anyways. Groom your horse from the mounting block. It seems odd at first, but soon you'll be leaning over to get the dirt from the other side. While you are there, try rubbing your mare's shoulder with your knee instead of just your hand. Do some ground work from the mounting block. Put your foot in the stirrup and than take it back out again. Next time put a little weight in it. Get as far as you can with it all being fun. Most of all, have no expectations. If your goal is too big you will feel defeated if you don't get there. Have your goal

be so miniscule that you can't help but surpass it!

Set tiny goals every day.

You can have huge long term goals. Just don't make big goals for today. Tiny steps add up fast- one step forwards, two steps back goes no where even faster. If you are afraid to ride in a group don't just sign up for a horse show and think you will just make yourself survive the schooling ring! Go ahead and sign up for that show, but make sure you have friends lined up that will help you with your goals. Maybe day one your friend can hand walk her horse in the middle of the arena while you ride on the rail. Your goal for the next day could be to ride walk and trot while she walks her horse on the rail. Slowly build the number of other horses and the intensity of what they are doing and how close they can get to you. Of course you first may have to work on your fear of asking the other boarders if they could help you!

If you want to compete in a 3'6" jumper class and have never competed at all, than maybe your first show should be over a low course- maybe even cross rails- and your goal should be to not fall off. If your horse refuses a cross rail you may feel awfully silly, but if your goal was only to stay on you can be assured that at least you are still on your training schedule. Spend the week desensitizing your horse to tarps and umbrellas and practice increasing his confidence over small fences. Make your goal to not have any refusals next show- even if you have to trot the course. If that is your only goal and you feel your horse sucking back ten strides out, you can get off and lead your horse across it by hand. Yeah, you'll get disqualified- you'll also build your horse's confidence and be that much closer to your long term goal. (Just make sure you've lead him across things at home first!)

Whether dealing with your fear, or your horse's fear, making tiny progresses regularly will give you bigger gains than you can imagine.

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