



Fear and Self-Image

Julian Nangle

It is surprising how linked these two are. If in our self-image we are strong, resilient, confident, then fear is not going to be a familiar travelling companion. It will appear only at appropriate moments. Fear would not be doing its useful job if it failed to arise when, for example, we encountered a man-eating tiger on a lone safari trip. However good our self-image we will allow fear in at this juncture in order to give ourselves instructions on how best to

self-protect. If, on the other hand, we see ourselves as, say, stupid, or unlovable, then everything we do in life will be done as a defence against confirmation of this self-image by the external world. It is this motivation that I would term 'unnatural' fear.

I have a client, Frances, whom I would describe as 'racked' by fear. She can hardly put two words together for fear somebody will think what she says is stupid. This is no doubt partly due to her earliest years when

Julian Nangle is a counsellor/psychotherapist who lives in Dorset. He has worked there for six years in private practice.

the attitude of parents and older siblings (she has a much older sister) may not have been as affirming and reassuring as it could have been. Older sister was, and is, 'racked' with jealousy of Frances due to what she perceives to be a closer relationship between parents and Frances than she had. Consequently older sister used to tease Frances mercilessly, and basically put the fear of God into her. At school Frances, completely primed to be the bullied one, became the bullied one. She found her innate shyness and withdrawn nature interpreted as she was fast interpreting it herself, as due to her being stupid. She grew into a teenager believing herself to be a half-wit.

After nearly two years of therapy with me Frances has begun to admit that it is not that she is a half-wit, but that her self-image tells her she is, and that this self-image is kept in place by an inappropriate, unnatural fear of being shown up. Frances' defence has been to turn inwards and not let any of herself out, for fear that somebody will say she is a half-wit.

The sad fact is that when someone behaves like this it only serves to reveal their self-image. We all, however hard we try to hide it, reflect out our self-image, albeit wrapped up in as good a defence as we can muster. Frances told me that 75% of her fear is to do with the idea of somebody pointing the finger at her and laughingly saying 'you stupid fool'. This may not sound like an intolerable burden, until you realise that fear occupies Frances' world 100% — not 90%, not 80%, Frances is 100% of the time terrified by life and 75% of the reason for this is fear that someone will confirm her self-image — that she is stupid. I believe Frances is giving me the

75% figure so as to minimise her plight to me. I cannot think of anything which contributes to her permanent state of fear other than the fact that her self-image is one of being stupid and that somebody, anybody, any time, might confirm this.

Consequently Frances has no social life whatsoever, apart from sitting in on the edge of a group of old school acquaintances who 'tolerate' her but give her nothing and take nothing from her. She is 19 years old and has not yet held the hand of a boy, let alone kissed one. Frances is not ugly — on the contrary, she is very attractive.

One final story about Frances, to illustrate the lengths to which this kind of fear, generated by self-image, can drive a person. At college, every day at lunchtime Frances would queue up with everyone else, keeping her head down. Once she had got her tray she would head off for the lavatories where she would go in, lock the door and sit in the cubicle and eat her lunch. When I asked her why she did this she told me, after much hesitation, that it 'felt better'. In other words she was not exposed to the risks of social intercourse.

I am pleased to say that things have improved considerably for Frances since those dark days, although there is still much work for her to do on her self-image — improvement which can only come about steadily. Rather as a glassblower creates his pieces, so a person with a poor self-image must painstakingly, patiently build themselves to a point where they are able to cope with the world and themselves as they are. They have to forgive themselves for being who they truly are. Once this is done the journey to the core of their being can begin.