The People Who Do Not Fear

When Courage Is the Wrong Explanation

Introduction

Some people appear extraordinarily brave.

Place them in circumstances which cause others to hesitate, retreat, panic or become overwhelmed and they may become remarkably calm.

- Danger approaches.
- Their thinking becomes clearer.
- Their movements become deliberate.
- They assess rather than recoil.

Others observing them naturally reach for familiar explanations.

- Courage.
- Nerve.
- Fearlessness.
- Perhaps even attraction to danger.

But there is another possibility and it is fundamentally different.

What if the person is not overcoming fear at all?

What if the internal emotional event which most people must overcome is either markedly attenuated, unusually processed, or, at the extreme, largely absent?

Such a person may understand fear intellectually.

- They know what the word means.
- They recognise it in other people.
- They understand the circumstances conventionally expected to produce it.
- They may recognise danger perfectly well.

But understanding fear and experiencing fear are not necessarily the same phenomenon.

This distinction changes almost everything, because courage ordinarily presupposes fear.

The courageous person experiences fear and acts notwithstanding it.

The person who does not experience fear in the ordinary way has accomplished something quite different.

Perhaps nothing has been overcome at all.

Fear Is Not Danger

Fear and danger are frequently treated as though they were synonymous.

They are not.

Danger exists externally, whilst fear occurs internally.

A vehicle travelling towards somebody at lethal speed presents danger whether the person is frightened by it or not.

A weapon remains capable of causing injury irrespective of the emotional state of the person facing it.

Consequently, absence of fear does not necessarily imply failure to recognise danger.

A person may understand perfectly: That can kill me, without them experiencing the accompanying emotional response, *“I am afraid that it will”*.

This distinction is essential.

Fear is one of the mechanisms through which human beings respond to perceived threat. It can sharpen attention, initiate avoidance and prepare the body for action.

But the intellectual recognition of risk can also exist independently of the subjective experience of fear.

One concerns knowledge and the other concerns feeling.

For most people they arrive together.

For some, however, the relationship is different.

Understanding an Emotion One Does Not Experience

Human beings routinely understand things they are not presently experiencing.

One can understand grief without grieving.

Understand hunger whilst full.

Understand pain whilst comfortable.

But, for a moment, imagine something more unusual.

Imagine learning an emotion principally through observing its manifestations in everybody else.

The person learns that certain circumstances are described as frightening.

- They observe widened eyes.
- Changes in voice.
- Hesitation.
- Withdrawal.
- Panic.
- Physiological agitation.

They learn the vocabulary.

They understand the social meaning.

They recognise the behavioural pattern.

Eventually they possess an intellectually sophisticated model of fear, but that model remains observational.

Fear becomes something almost like a language learned from other people.

They can speak about it.

- Recognise it.
- Predict it.
- Accommodate it.

But their understanding may not arise from the same internal experience.

This produces an unusual relationship with danger.

The Illusion of Thriving on Danger

From the outside, such people may appear to thrive in dangerous circumstances.

That interpretation can be misleading.

To thrive on danger implies attraction. It suggests excitement, appetite or gratification derived from risk.

But suppose none of those things are taking place.

Suppose instead that one of the principal psychological impediments experienced by everybody else simply isn't operating at all.

Then what observers interpret as extraordinary performance under fear, is actually performance in the absence of fear.

That is a profoundly different proposition.

Imagine two people confronted by the same emergency.

One must simultaneously:

- understand the problem;
- control physiological arousal;
- suppress panic;
- overcome an impulse to retreat;
- maintain concentration;
- and formulate a response.

The other principally has to:

- understand the problem;
- formulate a response;
- act.

To an observer, the second person may look superhumanly composed.

Internally, however, there may be nothing heroic about the composure.

The emotional battle everybody assumes is occurring is absent.

That is the quasi-illusion.

The person does not necessarily become exceptional because danger has arrived.

Danger may merely expose an emotional difference which ordinary circumstances conceal.

When the World Becomes Quieter

Danger produces noise. Not merely physical noise, but psychological noise.

- What if?
- Get away.
- Something terrible is happening.
- What happens to me?
- What happens next?

Fear can populate consciousness with competing demands at precisely the moment when decisions must be made quickly.

For someone whose fear response is absent, the same situation may appear comparatively uncluttered.

- There is the threat.

- There are the available options.
- There is the necessary decision.
- Act.

Consequently, situations experienced by others as chaotic can sometimes feel unusually simple.

This may explain why some apparently fearless individuals seem almost more comfortable when circumstances become serious.

It is not necessarily that danger comforts them. Instead, it removes ambiguity.

- Ordinary social life is complicated.
- Emergencies can be brutally clear.
- Something is happening.
- Something must be done.

For a highly analytical person with little subjective fear, clarity may be easier to navigate than uncertainty.

This Is Not Necessarily Courage

We should be precise with language.

Courage is among humanity's most admirable qualities precisely because it ordinarily involves a conflict.

- A frightened person nevertheless enters the burning building.
- A soldier experiences terror but maintains position.
- A witness fears consequences but tells the truth.

The fear remains and action defeats it.

That is courage.

But, if another person enters precisely the same situation without experiencing comparable fear, calling the behaviour courageous may describe how it looks, rather than what psychologically occurred.

The action may still be admirable.

It may still involve sacrifice.

It may still demonstrate principle, judgement or extraordinary commitment.

But the internal mechanism is different.

The distinction could almost be expressed mathematically:

- Courage is action despite fear.
- Fearlessness is action without fear.

They can produce identical behaviour.

They are not, however, identical experiences.

The Advantage Can Become a Liability

It would be tempting to regard absence of fear as an unqualified advantage. It is not.

Fear exists for a reason.

- It protects.
- It warns.
- It encourages caution.
- It makes organisms withdraw from threats capable of destroying them.

A person who experiences little fear may therefore possess an unusual advantage in circumstances requiring calm action while simultaneously possessing a potentially serious vulnerability.

The absence of fear does not make danger less dangerous.

This is where disciplined reasoning becomes essential.

If emotion does not provide the braking mechanism, then judgement must.

Risk must be calculated rather than felt and consequences must be understood intellectually.

Restraint must sometimes be chosen deliberately where another person's nervous system would impose it automatically.

The capable fearless person is therefore not someone who disregards danger. It is someone who has learned to compensate for diminished emotional warning with exceptionally rigorous cognitive assessment.

Without that discipline, fearlessness can become recklessness.

With it, the same characteristic can produce remarkable composure.

Why Others May Misunderstand Them

The fearful person naturally interprets the fearless person through their own emotional architecture.

They think:

How can you possibly remain calm?

But the question assumes that the other person has first experienced the same fear and then successfully suppressed it.

They have not.

This can create considerable misunderstanding.

- Calmness may be interpreted as indifference.
- Decisiveness as aggression.

- Emotional neutrality as coldness.
- Willingness to confront danger as thrill-seeking.
- Persistence under threat as extraordinary courage.

Each interpretation assumes an internal emotional process which does not exist in the expected form.

The individual themselves may struggle to explain the difference because language concerning emotion is largely constructed by people who experience the emotion conventionally.

How does somebody describe the absence of something everybody else assumes must be present?

Perhaps simply:

I understand why you are afraid. I understand what could happen. I am simply not experiencing what you are experiencing.

The Paradox

There is an intriguing paradox here.

A person who experiences no fear may understand danger exceptionally well. Indeed, they may sometimes analyse it more accurately because their assessment is less distorted

by the emotional consequences of contemplating it, but the reverse is equally possible.

Without fear's warning signal, they may underestimate danger unless they have developed strong intellectual safeguards.

Everything therefore depends upon judgement.

Fearlessness without judgement is hazardous.

Fearlessness combined with disciplined judgement can be formidable.

The difference is not whether somebody is frightened. It is whether they correctly understand reality.

A Different Kind of Mind

Perhaps we should therefore be cautious before describing such people as brave, reckless, heroic or dangerous.

Those words interpret behaviour through conventional emotional assumptions.

There may instead be people whose internal architecture simply differs.

- They do not seek danger.
- They do not necessarily enjoy danger.

- They do not necessarily require danger.
- And they may have no particular desire to prove themselves against it.

Danger simply does not impose upon them the same emotional tax.

When danger arrives, other people see transformation.

The individual experiences none.

They remain essentially what they were five minutes earlier.

The world changed.

They did not.

And perhaps that is why they appear so unusual within it.

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