

THE ROOT OF FEAR ¹

-Peter Skaller-

A. The origin of fear

After Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, ...*the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself."* And He said, "*Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?*"² Later we read: *Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden ... and ... stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.*³

Being afraid is the very first human emotion the Bible explicitly mentions. It appears immediately when the 'Fall' into the world of sense-experience is initiated by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. In the biblical account, fear appears to be joined with all that we experience in the earthly world. This description of fear is coupled with God's first question to the 'fallen' human being, "*Where are you?*" Notice that the question is not answered. The man only says, *I hid myself*, seemingly not knowing where or who he is and thus being afraid. Jewish legend refers to "naked" as the loss of the "cloud of glory," [the sheaths of auric light] that surrounded the human being before the Fall.⁴

The original fear led to hiding to avoid being "seen," that is, being known in the "fallen" state. Since the way back into the garden was blocked, this leads us to consider that our state of being alienated from both our true being and the divine world, as well as being mortal, arose out of divine intention.

Obviously, this original fear originated earlier and lies deeper than any of the fears we normally experience in today's life.

B. Fear in today's world

We will not here examine in detail the many fear-causing phenomena in our world today. The daily media cover these thoroughly and we know them from personal experience. A short list could include the abuses and injustices connected with ideological, political or religious fanaticism as expressed through nationalism, racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia and the proliferation of verbal violence and the use of weapons both in war and on our streets. Then there are the devastating results of ecological degradation and catastrophe, unemployment and/or meaningless and underpaid work, poverty, hunger, loneliness. And of course there is also illness, pain, often inadequate medical care, and death itself. There are also well-known everyday psychological dynamics that are rooted

in fear. A short list here could include the fears of making a mistake, of ridicule or rejection, of failure, and of lies being uncovered. Most of the above causes of fear have long been with humanity but today they seem to be pressing upon us ever more intensely.⁵

During Advent we hear from the Luke's gospel⁶, *There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth dismay among nations, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, [people] fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world. Rudolf Steiner said, Before birth, souls have a certain fear and anxiety about entering the world in which intelligence has such a propensity and leaning towards evil and which is caught in a descending development.*⁷

We can readily identify 'materialism' as a common denominator under these phenomena. But, Dr. Steiner said that *Modern materialism [itself] arose out of fear*⁸ and that all we do in the western world is permeated by *fear mixed with hate*. He says, *The signs of the times stand with menacing significance before us and their message is: Until now... [human beings]...were all secretly afraid of one another. Their fear was masked under all sorts of other feelings. But now we need an attitude of soul that will be able to embrace a world civilisation. We need a confidence which will be able to bring balance... The assumption today is that economic problems can be handled quite on their own account ... [such as] how all the trading peoples on earth may have free access to market[s], and so on. But these problems will not be settled...until [we] become aware that all economic activities and [social] relations presuppose the trust of one [person] in another. In the future this trust will be attained only in a spiritual way.*⁹ One cannot trust what one fears. Can each of us truthfully recognize how this lack of trust works in us?

We can also ask if nature's cataclysms and sufferings ultimately stem directly from this fear and hate. Consider, for example, that immediately after Cain killed Abel the Lord said to Cain: *...the ground... has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you...*¹⁰ And later to the Israelites the Lord said *...if you do not...carry out...these commandments... I will...make your sky like iron and your earth like bronze;...your land will not yield its produce and the trees of the land will not yield their fruit.*¹¹ The direct effects of human morality on nature are discussed in detail in other writings.¹²

Are the psycho-socio-political-economic factors mentioned above the *true causes* of pervasive fear, or is an underlying, more fundamental, or 'original fear' actually the source of the fear- and hate-engendering dysfunctional behaviour of people towards one another and nature. If we explore our fears, and carefully peel them away like an onion, can we uncover a deeper, fundamental "root" out of which the others spring? This is easier said than experienced.

C. The fear of self-knowledge

Anthroposophy describes a seeker's devastating experience upon first approaching the threshold to self-knowledge: *...we experience ourselves as being an error. The self I think I am is not really my self.* The normal sense of self is experienced as a *depressing and painful* illusion. Courage is necessary in *facing the pain of oneself without prejudice. Only when [we have penetrated deeply enough into our own being] do we perceive how dearly we love that in ourselves which must be felt as ugly.*¹³

Ugly? In spite of a prior general sense of our decency, we uncover aspects of our soul that we despise. We discover what St. Paul means when he says, *I do not do the good which I want, rather the evil which I do not want is what I do.*¹⁴ There are many lists and formulations of the immoralities we so readily cover up for fear of facing them in ourselves. For instance, there are the Seven Deadly Sins given by Catholicism. But these "expansive" sins were named at a time when their paired, "contractive" opposites were overlooked, along with the middle, balanced, or "golden mean" between them. A complete reckoning might look like this:

"Seven Deadly Sins" (expansive)	The Balanced Way (Virtues, Golden Mean)	Contractive sins
Pride	Humility	Self deprecation
Greed	Charity	Wastefulness
Lust	Chastity	Lack of Interest
Envy	Acceptance	Dissatisfaction
Gluttony	Temperance	Asceticism
Wrath	Patience	Passivity
Sloth	Diligence	Ambition/Workaholicism

Other sins given in a threefold ordering in various sources include 1. Vanity/ambition, untruthfulness, and anger; 2. Strayings, denials and weaknesses; 3. Fear, hatred, and doubt of the spirit. Also mentioned are the love of comfort and fear of the unknown.^{11, 15}

Rudolf Steiner explains that we can be thankful that we do not readily experience these dark sides of our being: *...it is a boon to the...soul not to be led...to undergoing the dread of self-annihilation at the threshold.* He describes how we are protected by a *stern guardian* from experiencing this in full force before we are adequately prepared.¹⁶

D. Fear of the spirit and of death

But there is an even deeper basis for our fear of self-knowledge. In a number of lectures¹⁷ Dr. Steiner describes that, in the deep core of the human being, beneath everyday consciousness, there exists an 'oven of destruction' in which all of the matter we ingest, drink and breathe is rendered chaotic and is materially obliterated before being spiritualized and transmuted into the substances of our physical body. (Strictly speaking,

we are not what we eat.) Furthermore, in this oven, thoughts based only on sense impressions are also destroyed. All of this occurs *behind* the 'mirror' of our physical body which reflects back into consciousness the experiences we have in the sense-world and upon which our memories, thoughts, and feelings build what we call our self or ego. Therefore this oven of destruction behind the mirror also nullifies our concepts of self. Thus we harbour an unconscious fear of looking behind the mirror and finding no one. Steiner said: *Enclosed within [us is] a fiery centre of destruction, and ... the forces of decline can be transformed into forces of ascent only if [we become] conscious of this fact.*¹⁸ The connection to the earlier description of the Fall is obvious.

The spiritualization of matter as well as the spiritualization of our earthly self can be called "transubstantiation." To consciously penetrate this process was the original concept behind the sacrament of the Eucharist in which the transubstantiation, unconsciously occurring deep within us, is placed before the senses so that we may begin to accompany it with our thinking. Christ's presence and working in this event and the Communion was experienced as a fact. But as people lost the capacity to perceive spiritual events, intellectual discussions took place to try to decipher what was occurring. Modern materialism actually grew out of the attempts to grasp the transubstantiation when the Reformers deemed it to be merely symbolic. In The Christian Community the reality of spiritual transubstantiation through the working of Christ is set before us with the injunction; *Take this into your thinking*. In this way we may make progress in building a Christened self and body while also more and more infusing morality into the otherwise destructive processes occurring in the deep furnace within is. We do this so that *the Good endure*.

As has been said, the mirror, opaque for most of us, allows the development of the individuated ego and the possibility to determine moral action independently of any coercive influence from the guiding world-spirits. (This 'ego' is what is called our *temporal being* in The Christian Community's Act of Consecration of Man.) The destructive forces deep within us are "good" as long as they remain corralled in their proper place. If we have not developed enough inner strength to face their presence and to freely reach into this zone with moral impulses, they can leak outwards wreaking havoc in the world. *Evil is nothing other than the chaos that is necessary within human beings, which has been projected outside of them.*¹⁹

Ego-consciousness and the chance to develop moral freedom can develop as a consequence of the mirrored reflections of our sense experiences in the material world and therefore can only develop on the physical earth and in a physical body. Thus, we may consider the development of the mirrored or "errored" sense of self, to be the divine purpose of the Fall, which was alluded to earlier.

Because our sense of self results from the mirrored sense impressions of the physical body, we all suffer the fearful questions: "Where, then, am I, or you?" "What happens to me, or you, when the body dies?" **This is the root fear harkening back to the Fall.** It is the legitimate anxiety of souls on the earth, and is based on an accurate understanding of the

inherent problem of wearing the mask of materialism. The solution to this quandary lies with knowing and living the mystery of Christ's Deed. *Human beings could never take the earth-based I-consciousness with them over the threshold of death if they could not connect with Christ in the sense of Paul's words: "Not I but Christ in me." Christ makes it possible for the self to be taken across the portal of death.*²⁰ Thus, St. Paul can say, *O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?*²¹ This mystery is enacted before us and becomes accessible through the transubstantiation and communion in the Eucharist sacrament.

The fears of facing our error-based self, and the very dissolution of this self, that is, our mortality, mean that we require courage to penetrate the spiritual to learn who we are. Courage is also needed to overcome our fears of the unknown and the potentially uncomfortable or painful. Dr. Steiner explained that in the spiritual world *the comfortable solid floor is not there and one feels as though in an ocean of surging waves. One needs inner solidity to navigate through the spiritual world.*²² Furthermore, *The spiritual researcher...must [also] possess the capacity for pain and suffering... one enters a world for which one is not yet organized...a world that cuts and burns. One must go through this...One must apply everything that the soul has developed and then however wait until...in moments of grace the spiritual facts come towards one.*²³

Fear upon experiencing the spiritual world is often described in the gospels. As examples, at the Transfiguration ...*the disciples... fell face down to the ground and were terrified. And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid."*²⁴ And upon experiencing the angels on Easter morning, *the three women went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and [bewilderment] had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*²⁵

In the past, students seeking self-knowledge in the Mystery schools were rigorously trained to develop the courage to not only face the error-based self at the threshold to the spirit, but then to go even deeper and cross the threshold into the oven of destruction so the forces at work there could be mastered morally and true self-knowledge could be attained. Today, says Dr. Steiner, we fearfully cover all this up with all sorts of illusions and only sense its presence unconsciously. The most powerful mask used today is the idea that there is nothing in the world that the senses cannot perceive. But our essential task is to consciously and courageously enter this furnace of destruction and to apply what we have freely gained as morality.

To summarize, the root fear under all fear is the unconscious or only somewhat conscious fear of facing the moral imperfections of the temporal self and its dissolution. Overlaid on this are the fears of the unknown and of pain. Because we cannot see into the realm of death or into our inner furnace of destruction with everyday, sense-based consciousness, we are afraid of both death and of true self-knowledge.²⁶ **These fears are ultimately one and the same.** Our fear, as well as the self created from the mirror of the physical body,

are the result of the Fall. Although through this we now have the capacity for ‘knowledge of good and evil,’ that is sense-based, logical thinking, this knowledge is unable to reconcile its paradoxes and riddles, and our existential fear, as we so painfully know. St. Paul says, *For now we see only enigmas in a mirror, but in the future we will see reality face to face. Now I know in fragments, but then I will know fully, just as I will be fully known.*²⁷ And in the letter to the Hebrews it says, *...so that through [His] death he might destroy ... [the] power of death, ... and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.*²⁸

E. So what can we do to develop fearlessness?

Below I present a brief list of practices towards mastering fear, with a few comments. Courage is required in all cases. The common goal for all these practices is to gradually open the capacity and strength to experience the spiritual in the world and in oneself, and to be able to consciously face and master the potentially world-destructive powers that lie within us. It is far beyond the scope of this article to go into details about these suggestions. Some useful references are given. Based on the presumed readership of this article, and what I myself have chosen to work with, most of these suggestions are derived from the life of Anthroposophy and the life of The Christian Community. Many other valuable practices to help us work with existential fear may be found in spiritual/religious traditions from around the world.

1. Face our fears truthfully and sit with them. Look them in the eye and say “I see you, know you are there, and I acknowledge that I am afraid.” As much as possible, work to peel away the onion of fear, uncovering ever deeper layers down to the root fear out of which spring the others.
2. Practice thankful acceptance and wonder over one’s own biography and seek the meanings in its joys and sorrows.
3. Contemplate scripture and the teachings of spiritual masters who share their observations and understanding of the spiritual world, death, and the path to self-knowledge.
4. Strive to develop detachment regarding what the future may bring. For example, many are familiar with these lines by Rudolf Steiner: *[Knowing the spirit] can only be attained insofar as a person consciously looks to the realm that sustains us from behind the portal of death. We must eradicate the very root of fear and the terror over what presses towards human beings from out of the future. How a person today is brought to trembling and anxiety before what lies ahead in the future, and especially the hour of death! A person must acquire composure with respect to all feelings and perceptions regarding the future, and with complete equanimity readily meet whatever might come, thinking only that whatever comes does so through the supreme wisdom of world-guidance* (author’s literal translation).²⁹

In another passage Dr. Steiner said: *Thus one must learn to be without desire regarding future events; [to attain detachment] and break the habitual anxiety and*

*fear over future events. One must learn cold-bloodedly to say: You allow everything to come towards you, whatever may come, and not simply by saying this with dry, abstract concepts, but rather by making this into deep, inner feeling.*³⁰

5. Practice techniques of prayer and meditation as suggested by the great teachers, and also participation in the rhythmical life of religious rituals, such as the Eucharist, (e.g. The Act of Consecration of Man). Strive to know and feel *thankfulness* as the driving power that allows the magic of transubstantiation to occur.
6. Practice wonder-filled observations of nature and use methods of thinking that foster intuiting spiritual processes at work in nature.³¹
7. Practice service in the form of giving comfort to others, but also in receiving it.
8. Allow music to pour balm over the soul.
9. Practice humor. Laughter helps discharge tensions and fears inherent in dealing with the polarities and paradoxes of life on earth.
10. Though it is said that *perfect love casts out fear*,³² love cannot be “practiced” or willed into being. It can only be born from above, through Grace, when an opening has been created in a person who practices the above.
11. Finally, we can help our children become fearless by encouraging awareness such as is encouraged in this Evening Verse for children by Rudolf Steiner³³

*From head to foot
 I am image of God
 From heart to hands
 I feel the breath of God
 Speaking with my mouth
 I follow the will of God
 When I see God
 Everywhere, in mother and father,
 In all dear people
 In animal and flower
 In tree and stone
 There is no fear in me
 Only love for everything
 That is around me.*

There is no age limit for such words to be powerful medicine!

Ultimately the goal is to attain, in freedom, self-knowledge and world-knowledge and ultimately the capacity to love through a free experience of *Not I but Christ in me*. At the outset of this article, it was said that this would appear to be the current divine intention for earthly humanity.

Endnotes:

¹ Most of this article's content is based upon statements about fear that were made by Rudolf Steiner. Most of the translations of his remarks are my own. Bible passages are from the New American Standard Version, but in places indicated with [] I have substituted my own renderings. Quotations or paraphrases from Rudolf Steiner are referenced by the volume of the 'Gesamtausgabe' (GA) or collected works. All quotations are given in italics.

² Gn 3:9 – 11.

³ Gn 3:22 – 24.

⁴ L. Ginzberg. *Legends of the Bible*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia & Jerusalem, 1992, 647 pp.

⁵ "the things which must...take place [with an ever- accelerating rate]..." (Rev 1:1).

⁶ Lk 21: 25 – 26.

⁷ GA 125, Aug 16, 1919.

⁸ GA 207, Sep 23, 1921.

⁹ GA 207, Sep 23, 1921.

¹⁰ Gen 4: 11 – 12.

¹¹ Lev 26: 14 – 20.

¹² Skaller, P. 1998. *The Bible and Ecology (I and II)*, in: Perspectives, 66:2 and 3. See also: D. Boyd. *Rolling Thunder*. Dell, NY. 1974, 273 pp.

¹³ GA 16, *A Road to Self Knowledge*. Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1975. Fourth Meditation.

¹⁴ See Ro 7: 14 – 25.

¹⁵ P. Chödrön. *The Places That Scare You*. Shambala, Boston. 2002, 140pp.

¹⁶ See footnote 8.

¹⁷ GA 207, Sep 23, 1921 and GA 343, Sep 27, 1921 morning and afternoon, and Oct 6, 1921 afternoon.

¹⁸ GA 207. Sep 23, 1921.

¹⁹ GA 207, 23 Sep, 1921.

²⁰ GA 215, Sep 13, 1922.

²¹ I Cor.15:55.

²² GA 329, Nov 6, 1919.

²³ GA 329, Nov 6, 1919.

²⁴ Mt 17: 6 – 7.

²⁵ Mk 16: 8.

²⁶ Did Lazarus die or "only" enter the sleep of initiation? See John 11:1 – 44.

²⁷ author's rendering of I Cor 13:12.

²⁸ Heb 2: 14 – 16.

²⁹ These lines are from the popular "trust meditation" which can be found in various translations and versions that are in circulation. However, none of these versions stem directly from Rudolf Steiner. They were patched together and modified from various passages in his lectures and possibly even from elsewhere (Malcolm Gardner: anthropos-science@lists.reading.ac.uk, October 2001). The lines given here are my translation from a passage in Steiner's lecture "Erkenntnis und Unsterblichkeit" (Bremen, Nov. 27, 1910) which can only be found in volume 98 of *Beitraege zur Rudolf Steiner Gesamtausgabe* (<http://bdn-steiner.ru/cat/Beitraege/D98.pdf>).

³⁰ GA 60, Oct 27, 1910.

³¹ E.g. P. Skaller, *Nature Contemplations through the Christian Year*, 2015, Floris, Edinburgh, 158 pp.; J. Bockemühl. *In Partnership with Nature*. Bio-Dynamic Literature, Wyoming RI. 84 pp.

³² Jn 4:18.

³³ GA 40. 1908-09.