

in concert with fear

by Kelly Diels

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the question I ask myself

I survived childhood sexual abuse. I survived a soul-shattering divorce and depressions so cavernous my family feared I'd never climb out. I have been abandoned by a man while travelling in a foreign country. I have grown entire human beings using only my body. *Twice*. I have had squalling children carved out of my naked flesh. *Twice*. I have fed babies using only my breasts. I have worn a bikini in public (repeatedly but not recently). I have loved. I have loved a man so physically beautiful that I feared leaving my girlfriends alone with him - and *that fear was not irrational*. I learned to drive on a standard. I have spoken - *well* - in front of crowds. I have counselled women who were raped. I have been held down when I didn't want to be. I have been pregnant when I didn't want to be (**she's beautiful**). I have written myself out of broke and into business. I have ridden a horse that had never been ridden before. I have been hit square in the chest by an errant pitch and got back up and knocked the mothafucka out of the park.

so why am I still so scared?

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every time, I was afraid

every single time, I was scared.

Still am.

Thank goodness.

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everybody hurts

A long, long time ago, I had a new paramour. In addition to a new love, I also had a new job that was about to begin. We talked about it lots; schemed; plotted; or I did and he listened. I was excited. This job was a big deal.

The day came. I strapped into my pinstriped armour and strappiest shoes and sallied forth.

When I got home, and we were talking on the phone, he didn't ask about my new job.

"You didn't ask about my new job," I said.

"Oh, babe, how remiss of me. I forgot," he said.

He forgot, and I was crushed. How could he forget? This was a life-changing position for me. We'd been talking about it for weeks.

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He apologized, I accepted, and told myself we all make mistakes. I told myself not to be so sensitive. (I tell myself this a lot.) We went merrily along. He missed dates, he forgot special occasions, he forgot to call when he was late, he forgot to show up. Mentally and physically. His heart was AWOL.

But here's the thing: slips and slings and arrows - even unintended - sting for a reason. Gavin de Becker calls it 'the gift of fear': our instincts warn us of dangerous people and dangerous situations. Our conscious minds, impeccable manners and need to please often over-ride these messages.

But fear is a gift. So is loneliness. We keep trying to conquer fear and banish loneliness but there are lessons there. We need them.

The same is true of pain. Everyone in our life will hurt us sometime - it is only love that breaks your heart - but some hurts are smoke alarms sounding before we see the flames.

Listen to them. Pain is a wise old dinosaur.

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Fear

and

“life begins at the end of your
comfort zone” bullshit

Everybody hurts.

Everybody fears.

Everybody has a comfort zone.

And these things - hurt, fear, comfort zones - are not the things that hold you back.

But that's the party line, right?

If we could avoid hurtful situations (and harmful people), conquer our fears, and bust out of our comfort zones, we'd be Supermen.

I use the term deliberately. Without even going into Nietzsche's conception of Supermen (ubermensch), let's think about Superman, the comic strip hero and cultural icon.

Superman is not human.

And you *are* human and if you live in concert with other humans there are some immutable about the human experience: You're never in fact going to be in a relationship with someone with

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someone who won't hurt you; you're never going to be without fear; and you will always have a comfort zone.

And that is not the problem.

Fighting those things *is* the problem.

To fight those things is to fight *yourself* and it's a battle you won't win. It's like battling against breathing or against being deliciously human. (We've just talked about this, yes?)

So...if you're *not* going to fight hurt, fear and your comfort zone, what do you do?

Accept them. Love them.

That's what Havi Brooks does with her clients and their comfort zones.

She loves them. She grows them.

Havi Brooks is part of the pantheon of loopy advice giving gods and goddesses and my future business coach though she doesn't know it yet and neither does my anemic bank account. Havi, for example, writes that she is the Rainman of coaching and she hates the word coaching. Umm,

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sold.

She also worries, deeply, about the "face the fear and do it anyways" bullshit masquerading as therapy. She thinks it is abusive. She thinks that confronting fear entails a violence to self and re-experiencing pain and terror is regressive and personally harmful. She thinks we develop [comfort zones for a reason](#) and [you don't need to jump out of the plane](#):

For some reason, all sorts of people seem determined to push you out of where you're comfortable to where you're ... well ... uncomfortable. Which is bizarre enough that it's worthwhile to find out why.

Just so you know, I personally have zero patience with the whole "you have to leave your comfort zone if you want to make changes" thing.

Not just because it's a tired cliché of the "think out of the box" sort. Not just because it's an annoying self-help-ey trend. But because it's a seriously bad idea. Also, not true. In fact, I'd call it a potentially dangerous misconception...

I can't even tell you how many eager beaver coaches I meet at business events who can't

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wait to meet people **just like you**, so they can drag you kicking and screaming from your comfort zone.

They think they're doing you a favor. They're not.

They're not doing it out of meanness, of course. They sincerely want to help. They think that if you can leave the place where you're comfortable and try this new, scary thing, you'll get over it already. The problem is that sometimes what you need in order to grow is more comfort. And this kind of work needs to happen where you feel safe; where you're most comfortable.

That's why there's a zone for it.

In the future your grandchildren will look back on this age of insisting on people leaving their comfort zones with shock, horror and a sad shake of the head. The way we do now when we think about things like electric shock therapy and lobotomies. The atrocities of good intentions.

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So, as Havi so insightfully explains, it maybe that eager-beaver, in-your-face aggressive truth-telling and fear-confronting as-seen-on-TV (read: the blogosphere) is abusive and unhelpful. It may even be that what appears to be common-sense how-to-behave-properly advice is also deeply judgmental and self-righteous.

And not helpful at all.

So, if you listen to Havi and me, and decide you're *not* going to fight your fear, how do you move forward? How do you create? How do you do business? How do you have difficult conversations with your loverloverman? Or clientzilla? (*And what if they're one and the same?!*)

How do you get over your fear, or past it?

You don't.

It is *your* fear. That means it is part of you, dear human. It's always been with you and it will always be with you. Make room for it in your comfort zone. Take it with you. Fear is an unrelentingly loyal, lifelong companion.

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fear is a professor

This is what I think about fear:

Fear has a function. Fear is supposed to alert you to things that might harm you. When you're feeling scared, your reptile brain is taking care of you. That is his job.

Trying to run from fear, or suppress it, or deny it, or even overcome it is then pointless. Fear is a reptile. It will outlive your best mammalian intentions.

So this is what I think you do with fear: you treat it like a [feverish, crotchety professor who secretly adores you and wants you to be better](#), but makes your life a misery because he marks the hell out of your essays and takes you to task in class.

You pay close attention to fear, get close to it, and then you question fear.

You get curious about it. You ask fear:

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What is this? What is this about? What is true, clear and present danger, versus anxiety and worry? (*Oooh! oooh! I know this one: fear is a response to a material threat in your immediate present; worry is a hypothetical threat that exists in your mind rather than your reality.*) What are you trying to explain to me? What are you trying to keep me from doing? What would happen if I do it? Will this kill me? Is what is true, for you (fear), also true for me? Do you want to lock me in a box to keep me safe? Do I want to live in that box? Is my world that damn dangerous? Can my ego survive falling on my face or my ass? (YES)

And it is best to sit on the sofa and snuggle with your fear-professor while you ask these questions.

That's also how you get straight A's in university.

Or so I've heard.

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how to fight fear: don't.

What if you don't need courage?

What if you don't need to get over yourself?

What if you don't have to conquer your fears?

What if that thing that's holding you back, that thing you *think* you need to to do

in order to get what you want -

what if you don't have to do it?

I'm serious. Don't do it. Don't leap that hurdle. Don't knock down that wall. **Go around it.** It's the long way around, sure, but it still gets you there.

I travelled that road called Avoiding Scary Things. I don't know if it is the road more or less travelled - and this advice and this path is most certainly counter-intuitive - but **it got me where I needed to go.**

Just over eighteen months ago, I started a business. I didn't tell myself or anyone else it was a business and it didn't make a cent for more than seven months. But it was still a business.

But starting a business scared me because I thought it meant the daily doing of many things I fear. Knocking on doors? Asking for business? Making sales? Closing the deals?

Terrifuckenfying.

I'm great at writing; but I'm not so great at braving rejection. If that's what I had to do to be an artist and an entrepreneur, I would rather die.

And so I was, quietly, for a long time.

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another question I ask myself

(or: how not to write a first blog post)

And so there I was, dying quietly, slowly, burning to create but afraid to fail, and too scared to go knocking on doors to ask for business.

And if I couldn't or wouldn't conquer my fears - and I knew I wouldn't, otherwise I would have already - then how could I change anything?

I couldn't, right?

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Wrong.

Instead of battling my fears - or flagellating myself for *not* fighting them - I met myself where I was: a fragile, hothouse flower of a single working mama with very little childcare, even less disposable income, and a knack for writing.

I started by staying in my comfort zone. **What could I do without leaving the house?**

I could create a blog.

So I did. And in the very first post I asked myself this:

What happens when an overweight, broke, semi-lost but pretty smart single mom decides to rewrite her life in 18 months or less?

What a question.

(Before, I was dying of boredom. Right now, I'm dying of acute mortification.)

Remember this question.

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fear cannot be conquered.

make peace.

Self-help gurus and now-commercially successful artists counsel us to do what we love and the money will follow, jump and the net will appear, quit your job and let the chips fall where they may, face the fear and do it anyway...

And, I suppose, they're right. It seems like a lot of them have done just that, so they're speaking from experience. They've propped their TVs up on cardboard boxes or lived in unheated squats in Berlin or had the roof cave in and couch-surfed.

And, as part of that narrative, that before and after, we absorb the message that these people

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were either fearless or scared **but got over it.**

Which makes us think that facing down fear, battling it, conquering it, exiling it, is the first step towards our dreams.

And so we valiantly suit up and go to war.

With ourselves.

We fight and we fight and we fight. And then we get tired, survey the battlefield and notice that Fear is fine. It is not waving the white flag. In fact it looks like it has called in reinforcements.

Which *really* terrifies you.

Now you're scared that you're never *not* going to be scared and if you're never not scared, you're never going to realize your dreams. Because, in the oft-repeated formula for success, first you have to vanquish your fears.

But you can't. So you surrender.

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And that's the truth: you will never be free of fear. But that doesn't mean you've got an excuse to put away your dreams.

Conquering fear is not the first step towards accomplishing your goals. Accepting your fears and accommodating them is the first step. And that means you've got to stop flagellating yourself for being a fear-ridden creature because disparaging yourself and luxuriating in your fears will solidify your already resilient excuses against action. So stopping *that* is essential to moving forward; vanquishing fear is *not*.

As [Sofia Quintero writes](#),

I am beginning to wonder if what truly scares us about letting the ugly truths about our beautiful icons be known is the challenge it makes to us ordinary people. We do not fear that by exposing the shadows of our heroes we diminish their extraordinary accomplishments. Quite the contrary, their human failings are a call for us to stop using our ordinariness as an excuse to not step up our contributions toward peace, justice and equality. We want to believe that Dr. King and others like him had such profound impact because they were preternaturally gifted human beings. Demigods and saints. Angels on earth. Something other than human.

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They were not. They were ordinary people who made extraordinary contributions *despite* their weaknesses and vices. Just like us they grappled with their own insecurities and ignorance. They, too, battled every day with pride, fear, lust, and all the other emotions and appetites that we confront each day of our lives. King, Sanger and X and all our other social justice heroes had their shadows. The only thing that separates them from us is that they did not use their imperfections as excuses to ignore demands for justice...

...If we accept this about our heroes, if we embrace the shadows that lurk behind their heroism, we can no longer say about any of them, “She made such a big difference because she was extraordinary and I am just an average person”.

Fear is not an excuse for inaction. Fear is *not* what holds you back. Fear is not something only *you* possess while magically fearless superheroes and social justice icons zip through the world changing it.

We're *all* scared.

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So...this exhortation to make peace with yourself and your fear is not a *Be Mediocre! Be Miserable!* manifesto or an incitement to the inaction of complaint.

It is just simple truth talking: **you will always be afraid**. Reality is a fucking mess, rife with fear and yet in that morass we dig in and we grow. We grow and we grow and we glow.

And buried therein are the tangled roots of juicy fear and fearsome joy.

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what happens

when you're scared

but

you act

in concert with your fear?

Remember this question?

What happens when an overweight, broke, semi-lost but pretty smart single mom decides to rewrite her life in 18 months or less?

Here's my answer:

She starts a blog.

She starts writing every day.

She finds her people.

She starts a business.

She finds her way.

She gets bigger in every way.

My blog became - and is - my live-action business card, therapists' couch, and way of fumbling towards craft and legacy.

And when I started my blog, I led with my strengths and accommodated my fears. I began from the centre of my very-small comfort zone. I did the thing everyone tells you NOT to do. I had faith. I believed that I built it, they would come.

So I wrote it, and they did.

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Sometimes you don't have to knock on doors. Sometimes you go through windows.

Or screens.

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so why am I still so scared?

Because fear is my friend

When I made space for my fear, was gentle with myself, stopped beating myself up for being scared (otherwise known as the state of being human), and met myself where I was, I started creating. I created in the midst of my fear and from my comfort zone. And the more I created, and the less friction I had with fear, the more my comfort zone expanded. Now, less than two years later I have a successful blog, business, a beloved, and the ability to say this - "All the best parts of me are big: brain, breasts, booty" - and *mean* it.

And I'm not done yet.

Everything - my dreams, my capabilities, my heart, my expectations, my rewards, my comfort zone, my life - is getting bigger.

Thank you fear.

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Fear is a wise old dinosaur. Fear is a crotchety professor who wants you to do better.

Fear is a fire alarm. Fear is inevitable. Fear is a fairy godmother.

Fear is a gift.

Fear is your very best friend.

Forever.

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discovering a delicious new fear.

yum.

For the last several years - scratch that, *forever* - my Big Fear about people, love, friendship, relationships has been this: Will this person hurt me? How do I protect myself? Should I get close to this person knowing he or she may later decimate me?

To deal with that fear - of rejection, of pain, of loss - I've decided (with the help of Bob Marley) that [pain and hurt are inevitable](#), and to try to live so as to avoid them is to live very, very small.

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And phooey to small.

That's how I managed my long-time fear. Then That Fear got sneaky and snuck in a new friend.

It goes like this:

What if I hurt him?

Let me tell you: I was surprised. This fear shocked me. The love renegade (c'est moi, Dear Reader), throwing caution to the wind, is suddenly...cautious?

All of this sounds very dramatic, and of course it is, but here's the second part of the surprise:

This is a very good fear to have.

It means it isn't all about me. It means I care. It means something of significance is growing

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in the midst of my life. It means I'm *growing* something of significance in the midst of my life.

Look ma! A new fear!

And that's why I'm learning to welcome fear. Because as you grow - as a person, a lover, an artist and an entrepreneur - your fears get bigger and better and more delicious.

Just like your life.

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another answer

(there's never just one answer):

live and love in the world

Nobody wants to be the boy in the bubble, the girl in the glass house or even the man on the moon and yet we insist on weaving ourselves leaden cocoons.

(And by "we", I mean me.)

I intimately understand - and live - the need for safety and how rarely it is met. I know why we start with small comfort zones (so we can stretch them). I'm entranced by the fantasy of being a wholesome, rule-following blonde who is rewarded for her right-stepping.

This is why we are seduced into building ourself fortresses of faith and inhabiting them. We find our people and stop talking to others outside that circle (this is the lure and danger of tribal thinking). We find our ideology (this is almost always a mistake). We find our radio station, set it and forget there are others. We find our neighbourhood and then the drive downtown starts to unnerve us. We find some answers and so stop asking questions.

The care-worn grooves of comfort do indeed comfort. And bind. This can be self-care or this can be fearful retreat.

I know this - I dance to the rhythm of come-here-go-away - but I relearned it this week from two very different sources.

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The first was a pastor of a church deeply involved with street youth, homeless, impoverished, and addicted peoples.

He was speaking of Daniel and sovereignty in any situation, of finding a way to be happy and empowered in any circumstance, even those not of your free choosing or preference. He cautioned against hiding behind your faith (the "Christian bubble", but we can apply it to any religion - Buddhism, Judaism, Law of Attraction, motherhood, retail, TV, Facebook). Instead of othering the other and seeking refuge in like-minded pockets of people, enter the world. Ameliorate wrongs. Speak to them. Offer welcome. Engage. Grow. Deepen. Love.

The second was a Saxis interview with Cole Riley, [writer of gritty, tender, urban, erotic fiction](#), who insists that

[We all have stories to tell](#). We have stunning stories that each and every culture can learn from. If you read some of the fine works of other writers in other cultures, there is a lot to learn. I have always been open to read works in translation. **Writers must be a part of the world.**

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And this, I think, is wise counsel from two wise men. It is what perhaps we use business, busy-ness, overscheduling, overeating, under-loving, drinking, tweeting, shopping, watching TV, worrying about money, dating-as-entertainment, compulsive house-cleaning (I am mercifully free of this addiction), reading, writing, checking e-mail, dog-walking and [insert distraction of your choice] to avoid. It is what we use fear to avoid.

So that's my mission right now (and write now):

to be part of the world.

To engage with the sometimes unwelcoming world.

To live and love in the world.

To be here, now.

What's yours?

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In Concert with Fear: The Rehearsals

Exercise 1:

Write your story of resilience, you amazing creature, you.

Catalog all the extraordinary situations you've survived.

Post it. Frame it. Laminate it. Make it into a wallet size card and carry it around.

Do whatever you need to do so you can see it...

...and believe it.

Because even when you're frightened, there's *nothing* you can't handle.

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Exercise 2:

Read [this](#).

Do you have a situation where fear kept you safe?

Write it down. Tell someone about it.

Remember it. Carry it with you.

Know that fear is your friend.

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Exercise 3:

Read [this](#). Then watch [this](#) and [this](#).

Thank your fear for keeping you safe.

Create a thank you. A tribute.

It could be a poem, a song, a paragraph, a video, a cake (yes, bake fear a cake, dammit!)

Just make something.

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Exercise 4:

Now, look at that thing you created.

Marvel at it.

Do you see what you just did?

You used fear to fuel to propel you forward rather than hold you back.

You used fear to *create*.

(Marvel some more.)

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Exercise 5:

Now, share your thing with an audience.

Because, darling, that's what artists and entrepreneurs - *you* - do.

Put it up on your blog.

(Don't have one? **Start one.**)

Or -

post it in a note in Facebook.

put the video on youtube.

send it out by e-mail.

print it.

paint it.

tack it to a telephone pole.

chalk it on the street.

record it.

film it.

sing it.

list it on etsy.

Just share it.

Because the world needs you and the thing you do.

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