

Stage Fright

WHAT IS stage fright? It is not a sound, natural fear, but instead the specter that appears when you rely on self for salvation and life. Self-centeredness, in fact, is a fear of fear itself—that is a phenomenon of the most intriguingly complicated structure. In fact, tell me: What did you really have to be afraid of that evening when as a child you were to recite your little poem in front of a large audience? You knew your material perfectly. You had every possibility of playing your part without a hitch—*provided that* you were not overtaken, at the decisive moment, by that impish little intruder, that miserable “fear of fear.”

And how did things really proceed? Did Mr. Stage Fright, the old villain, break his appointment with you? Certainly not. He turned up right on time. And he spoiled everything, or almost everything. But why, then, do we invite such phantoms of the imagination and permit them to terrorize us so dreadfully? What is it, exactly, that gives this fighting with windmills such a paralyzing power over our lives?

It is, once more, our own egocentric attitude. Of course, in his calmer moments of objective retrospect, any minister will admit the entirely illusory essence of the foe he has been grappling with. In fact, that illusoriness is the very reason why it becomes so hard to back the enemy down. He has the strategic advantage of existing only in your own excited mind, playing at hide-and-seek with you, far up there in the ethereal regions of unreality. But at the same time he is certainly real enough. Or is egocentricity not real enough?

To tell it openly, what was it that seemed to matter most to you that morning when you were to make your great debut as a pulpit preacher, or

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whatever it was? Was it the good you here finally had a chance to do for a group of listeners needing your help in some way or other? I am afraid not. It was—to be recklessly honest—rather your personal appearance and prestige, wasn't it? I imagine you saying to yourself that morning, “Now look here, old chap, you must see to it that you do not cut a poor figure. This is your chance to score a personal victory, perhaps even build up your future greatness.”

Well, that is just how we are. We are all so awfully self-conscious, always bent on showing off, appearing to our best advantage, being successful *for our own sake*.

“What will my public think of me?” That is my one great anxious question. And this is just the moment when everything begins to go wrong—with me! I have fallen into the hopeless dilemma of fear—fear as a disrupting, disorganizing emotion!

And now—since I know I cannot avoid the moral and religious point of view and still remain faithful to that great Selfless One who is the self-evident harbor of the other-centered preacher launching out on the open sea—it would be strange indeed if I failed to spell out the word that gives us some definite information about the way the old wonder actually takes place.

Bible Formula for Overcoming Fear

The Christian gospel has a grand formula for the expulsion of fear. (Obviously, we are here dealing with fear as a disorganizing sentiment, more than with any other kind of fear.) It states unceremoniously: “Love casts out fear.” Does that formula apply to our predicament?

Yes, love always applies. Love and truth. Without these there is no cure for any disruption.

First, is it true that it is *my person*, and nothing else, that counts? It is *not* true. That morning, for instance, when I was to present my first sermon it was the word from God I was commissioned to present that counted. And, of course, this is precisely where the secret of *love* also comes in—and its wonderful faculty of casting out fear.

With a true other-centered attitude on that occasion, what would my prevailing concern have been? Simply this:

"This morning I have something really valuable for those dear people in front of me, something from God Himself, something to cheer them in their dependency, something to help them in their need. I must be eager to serve them to the best of my ability. Then my own self becomes insignificant. It can so easily be left out of account, entirely forgotten. It can lose itself in the outside world, rest peacefully in the great other reality, in God."

This, and only this, would have been the pure truth on that occasion, as on so many others. So there is excellent foundation for the great psychological catchword of the gospel: "The truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). It is illusions that keep a human mind in gloomy bondage.

Besetting Emotion

Fear has become the besetting emotion of this generation. We are afraid of cancer, afraid of radioactive fallout, afraid of the ultimate disaster of a third world war with its hydrogen and cobalt bombs. And the worst of it all is this: Humanly speaking, our fears, in so many cases, seem to be only too well founded on realistic facts.

Nevertheless, man's one really dangerous enemy may still be found just inside himself. On the other hand, his true peace of mind, as well as his prosperity in material things, will always be measured by the degree in which he is able to *find values outside himself*. And, of course, the greatest of those values is God. God is man's Value par excellence. And if you fail to realize that this incomparable Value, this divine Value, is something you have outside yourself, then there is great danger that you have fallen a victim to a most egocentric type of "mysticism." That is, a definitely pagan type, or to a most *egocentric* theory of "spirituality," that is, pagan *spiritualism*. Self-idolization is the criterion for man's ideas of man going entirely wild. When man makes *himself* a god, or "a part of God," then he has reached the ultimate limit of self-centeredness. What he has actually done is this—he has made a *fool* of himself. He has lost his last hold on common-sense realism.

The only thing we really have to fear when we stand in the pulpit is self-centeredness. ■■