

The Power of Stupidity



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Chapter 14 – Stupidity and Fear

The bravest people in the world teach us that it's healthy and useful to be afraid. Believing that there is nothing to be feared isn't courageous, it's stupid. When fear is awareness of dangers and risks, it's a form of intelligence. Of course this is not the sort of fear that can be an ally and an accomplice of stupidity. But there are widespread types of fear that have nothing to do with a real understanding of what can be dangerous or unsafe. People can be afraid of being, of thinking, of understanding, of knowing (fear of knowledge is a nasty form of ignorance.)

People are often scared of having their own opinion – it's more comfortable to follow mainstream bias and prejudice. There is fear of shadows and fantasies, of imaginary problems. Many people are also scared about revealing their feelings (this is not to be confused with shyness – being shy is often a symptom of sensitivity and intelligence.)

Are these rare or unusual situations? Cases of psychological disease, or exaggerations of small problems? Let's look around – and also look at ourselves. We shall find that unreasonable, unjustified fear is much more widespread than it may appear. And nobody is totally immune.

Quite often, by running away from something that we had no reason to fear, we fall into a real trap that we hadn't noticed.

One of the basic learnings in life is the control of fear. Knowing how to have steady nerves and a clear mind in the face of real danger. And getting rid of imaginary fears.

Many children, and some grownups, are afraid of darkness. This isn't totally unreasonable. It makes sense to move more carefully when we can't see where we are going or what we are doing. But that doesn't mean that we must be afraid of darkness per se. And there is darkness that isn't in the environment, but in some part of our mind that we don't understand – and this, of course, makes us uncomfortable and scared.

There is also fear of responsibility. It can be scary to take decisions, to have opinions of our own, to lead, to be held accountable. This is (intentionally or unconsciously) a form of cowardice. We find imitation more comfortable than choice, fashions and trends more reassuring than taste. We think it's safer to adjust to prevailing opinions than to have any thoughts of our own. We prefer to follow other people's authority than to accept responsibility. So when something doesn't work we can put the blame on someone else. It's pretty obvious that this type of fear is related to ignorance and habit – and leads to stupidity.

Strange as that may seem, there is also fear of knowledge. A conscious or subconscious desire to avoid knowing what may cause doubt or perplexity. To stay away from what we fear we might not understand. To remain in the shallow, but comfortable, shelter of commonplace and prejudice.

A way of keeping people in blind obedience is to generate fear of the unknown and to make appear as frightful whatever doesn't suit the wishes and whims of power. «*Here comes the bogey man*» is a perverted tool of authority – often used with grownups as well as children.

It can be quite difficult to realize how often we are influenced by such forms of bad education – sometimes deliberately set up and cultivated by those who want to undermine our freedom of thought and behavior, but also mindlessly nourished by an accumulation of commonplace and widespread habits (in chapter 15 we shall see how habit can combine with fear.)

A basic tool of intelligence is balancing two risks. At one extreme of the spectrum, the fear of being inadequate, and thus not doing what we can. At the other end, the delusion of being able to do what is beyond our ability and competence – or, in a particular circumstance, can't be done.

Finding the right balance in each specific case isn't easy. But we should keep trying. Giving up too soon or too easily is harmful to us and to other people – that is to say, stupid. But so is overestimating our talent, our judgment or our understanding of situations – or assuming that we never make mistakes.

Just as it's stupid to think that we are immune from stupidity, and ignorant to think that we know everything, courage isn't the delusion of never being afraid. Even the most reasonable and well-balanced person has some hidden and unjustified fears, some areas of insecurity – and those weaknesses are more harmful when we aren't aware of their presence.

It's interesting to notice how some people, who in ordinary life are easily scared, can suddenly reveal, in the face of real danger, or when they are helping someone else, unexpected and extraordinary courage.

It's impossible to eliminate fear. But we can be aware of it, control it, limit its damages. Understanding our fears, and those of other people, is a way of being less stupid. Above all, we should not be afraid of fear. This is often easier than it seems.