

Transcending FEAR



Brian Germain

Transcending Fear

Transcending Fear, 3rd Edition
by Brian Germain
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Back Cover Photo:

The author under parachute at 13,000' over the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. Brian landed safe and dry on a tiny sand bar 18 kilometers out to sea.

Front Cover Photo:

Jump-run, same jump.

Dedicated To

The General Direction of
Up



We all have our individual paths;
What we share is our direction of motion.

Transcending Fear

Foreword

Dealing with fear is something we all have to do. The more awareness we pour into our experience, the more we will be able to be in control of it. By learning about the physical side of fear, we can counter the bodily effects that accompany the emotion. By learning to relax in our fear state by cultivating our calm state, we can direct our minds to return to a place of basic awareness and peace when we need it most.

The solution to fear is remembering how to relax. The problem is, many of us either have not developed this skill or have not practiced it in quite some time. We tend to solve our problems by going faster, not by cooling down. This method is a temporary solution to a permanent problem. Stress and fear are whittling away at our health and well-being each and every day of our lives. We must create space in our lives in order to return to the calm state as often as we can. We must do this work. Our very lives depend on it.

Ron Gorayeb
President
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Preface

The Story about the Cover

A few years ago I was hired by the Australian Parachute Federation to teach two courses, one on Advanced Parachute Aerodynamics and the other on the Psychology of Fear. After the conference, I was invited to make a jump onto a tiny sandbar in the Great Barrier Reef. I accepted the opportunity immediately, but unfortunately had to borrow a parachute from a friend, as I did not have one with me at the time. Eighteen of us put our gear together, including food, water, and a tiny inflatable water buoy in case we missed the island. Right...

The island, we were told, was not always there. It was swallowed up by the ocean during high tide, but no worries, they said, a boat was coming to pick us up. It was a dive boat that would bring us snorkeling gear so that we could see the reef after we landed on the island. If we landed on the island, that is. If we missed, we were most obviously screwed.

We took off from a small airport in Cairns, and headed east. The Australian coast line retreated into the distance, as we headed further out to sea. The land was a faint line on the horizon when our host and organizer, Crazy Charlie or something, pointed down to a tiny spec of white sand surrounded by miles and miles of emerald water. We were in fact, eleven miles from shore. This was what skydivers call “hero or zero”.

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The jump run was at 13,000 feet. It took everything I had to continue breathing normally. My body wanted to curl up into a little ball. My palms were sweaty. Over and over I took a deep breath, held it for a second, and then let it out slowly; relaxing all of my muscles and leaning back against the jumper behind me.

Then the call came out: “two minutes to exit!” I touched all my handles one last time, verifying that they were in the proper position and secure. I made sure the digital Elph camera that I had tied to my chest strap was not going to interfere with the operation of my parachute system, and that I would be able to easily take it out once I had deployed. The green light came on, and jumpers began exiting the plane. I took a deep breath, grinned, and exited into the blue-green heaven.

After opening my parachute, I pulled the camera out and tightened the strap around my wrist. I realized that if I simply took a picture of the reef from this altitude, it wouldn't be all that impressive. If, on the other hand, I just took the shot of me, none of the radiant colors below would be in the frame. Recognizing immediately what I needed to do, I grabbed hold of the rear riser strap on the left side of the parachute. Extending my right arm away from my body, I initiated an aggressive left turn that inverted me almost entirely and I clicked the shutter.

I took several shots like this. Ironically, and not beyond explanation, I actually was pushing the on-off button on the camera rather than the

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shutter. Somehow, magically, I managed to take one shot, and one shot only. This picture is on the back cover of the book.

I set myself up carefully, 90 degrees from the island, gradually awaiting the initiation altitude for my “hook turn” to final approach. At just under 600 feet I started a hard diving turn away from the island, 270 degrees around back to face the sand. I was traveling at over 60 miles per hour when I leveled off over the waves, which allowed me to drag my feet in the water on the way up the sandy beach. I ran out the landing, and cheered as the others followed, one by one, all landing safely on this miniature beach continent.

The boat didn't show up right away, giving us an hour to bask in the light of our achievement. We felt ship-wrecked, but with the promise of a rescue. I guess that is the best part of being marooned on a desert island anyway. When the boat finally did arrive, they brought the snorkeling gear, as promised. I put on my mask and fins and set out for the reef.

Whatever you have heard about this awesome spectacle pales in comparison to the actual experience of floating in the birthplace of life on our planet. The tremendous diversity of life is staggering, and if I did not need to keep my snorkel in my mouth, my jaw would have dropped. It was incredible.

In addition to the other skydivers, some fifty scuba-tourists were also in the water. Not one to take the road most traveled, I swam away from the others, out into the open water. I had hoped to see

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a sea turtle, since we had already spotted one from the island prior to our pick-up.

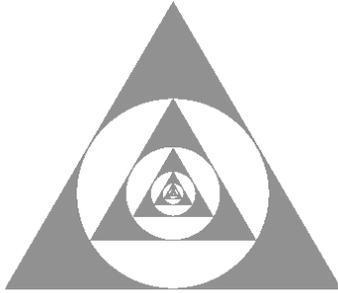
Then, in the distance, I saw a shape. It was an adult turtle, slowly swimming about five feet below the surface. I swam with an undulating motion, emulating the movements of other aquatic mammals, matching speed and heading with the turtle. I didn't want to alarm him; I just wanted to get a closer look at one of nature's most beautiful and ancient creatures.

At first he changed his heading slightly away from me. I understood his concern. I must have looked very strange to him, with my pink skin and a horn sticking out of my head. He didn't know if I was friend or foe. I swam beside him, gradually closing the distance between us. Eventually I was able to move into formation with him, and we made eye contact for several seconds. He must have realized that I was harmless, like billions of other inhabitants of the reef. He even let me reach out with my left hand and dock on his shell, swimming together in perfect unison.

None of this would have been possible if I had not dealt with my body's impulse to contract, nor my mind's repellant thinking. This is exactly why I wrote *Transcending Fear*. When we plan out our steps carefully and remain calm, our bravery is greatly rewarded. The steps to freedom are steep, but invariably worth the effort.

-Brian Germain

Introduction



Introduction

The modern world is "running scared." We are running so fast that we have completely forgotten how to be truly happy. This is because we have lost the essential survival skill called "self-soothing." Consequently we find ourselves living in a world full of fearful beings, rushing around and avoiding everything that scares us. Worst of all, we are avoiding one another.

We need to realize that it is the state of fear itself that is the cause of our unhappiness. How we relate to fear is a core determining factor in whether or not we are able to solve life's challenges. We blame our work schedule, the never-ending cycle of giving and receiving money, and all the other intense human dramas. In the end, the real problem is the fact that we keep running faster.

If we are to alter humanity's apparent collision course with destruction, we each need to learn how to slow down and calm down. Yes, it really is that simple, and there is no other choice.

As you may already know, I am a professional skydiver. When I first started jumping out of airplanes, falling through the sky was an

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absolutely terrifying experience. As I became more relaxed in the sky, however, I realized that there was a whole realm of possibilities that I was not able to see when I was filled with fear. It was when I finally surrendered to where I was actually going and worked with the air as it flowed over my body that I realized that I could fly.

The secret to surviving as a modern human lies in finding the way to fly, rather than fall. Fear is a feeling of being out of control, falling toward an unwanted destiny. When we work with what we have, who we are, and where we want to go, we can find our way to freedom. If we allow fear to be our master, there is only one place to go: straight down. Our lives become a fear-driven cycle of avoiding what we do not want, rather than finding a way to create what we do want.

Emotions are powerful. When we allow our emotions to run our lives, we find ourselves living out plots that we might have played out differently had there been no compelling momentum. It is through our ability to seize control over our personal experience that we take responsibility for the world around us. We must remember that we always play a part in the world, whether we know it or not. This power requires a deliberate choice to help things in a positive direction. The first step, of course, is believing that this is possible.

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My Story

Everyone has a “story”: a dramatic anecdote explaining why we allow ourselves to back down from what scares us most. We hide behind these tales from the past, and consequently cut ourselves off from positive futures. If you, the reader, are to know that I am for real, I must bare the soft white underbelly of my own personal trauma. So here’s my story...

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Chapter One

When I was about six years old, my parents took me to New York City. While we were there, we visited the Empire State Building. I remember taking an elevator to a balcony on one of the highest floors. It took me several minutes just to creep within a few feet of the railing. As I got closer to the edge, I noticed that my knees were bending. It was as if I was growing weaker and weaker, like Superman when he is exposed to Kryptonite.

I finally got there. I looked over the railing and straight down, 1000 feet above the street. I was spellbound. As I gazed down into space, awe-struck by the fruits of my bravery, my fun-loving Dad snuck up behind me, jabbed me in the side and yelled “Boo!” I managed to retain the contents of my bladder, as well as the memory to this day.

I have always been fascinated by my fear of heights. Unlike most Acrophobics, I have chosen to

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make this my life's work. I am a professional skydiver with over 10,000 jumps under my belt, a mountain climber and a ski racer. I am also an effective teacher of these activities, simply because I have needed to work so very hard to liberate myself from my own fear, my enemy within. In essence, I have been creeping back to that railing my entire life.

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Chapter Two: More Learning

When I was 25 years old, I became very interested in paragliding. Similar to a hang-glider, the paraglider is an inflatable foot-launch wing much like a modern skydiving parachute, only much larger. When done carefully, this is an incredibly beautiful and rewarding activity. If the wind is strong and turbulent, however, paragliding can be very dangerous, even for the seasoned pilot.

Having just purchased a brand new paraglider, I climbed atop a mountain in northern Vermont. It was quite windy, so I stood on the summit with another pilot, waiting for the wind to lighten up enough for us to launch. I really wanted to fly.

Despite significant evidence to the contrary, I convinced myself that it would be safe to pull my wing out of its pack and inflate it. I just wanted to feel the wing over my head. I asked the other pilot to assist by holding me onto the ground.

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After flying the wing over my head like a kite for ten minutes or so, I convinced myself that conditions were safe enough to launch. I was wrong. As soon as my assistant released his grip on my harness, I shot into the sky like a homesick angel.

I immediately deformed my wing to descend out of the powerful ridge lift that was drawing me up and back toward the vicious turbulence on the leighward side of the mountain.

I managed to penetrate into the wind and get down to the landing zone at the bottom of the mountain. When I began my first “S-Turn” to set up for landing, all hell broke loose.

The entire right side of my wing folded under and collapsed, sending me spiraling toward the earth. I stabbed my left steering line to arrest the spin and get the wing back under control, but it was too late.

I hit the ground with enough speed to bounce over 60 feet through the air following my first impact. I came to rest in a sitting position, with my legs under me. I tried to get up, but it was useless. My right femur was crushed.

Thanks to the efforts of the local rescue squad and a brilliant orthopedic surgeon named Andrew Kaplan, I survived the event and have returned to the sky to paraglide, as well as making over 8000 parachute jumps since that fateful day. Two years later, I stood atop the X-Games podium, World Champion of Freefly Skydiving.

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Lemons into Lemonade

It was not easy to get back in the air. Vivid flashbacks of the crash haunted me for years. At night, just as I was falling asleep, I would see the paralyzing image of the earth racing up at me, and I would jerk into wide-eyed wakefulness, my heart pounding.

Nevertheless, I did get back in the air. Rather than tucking tail and running the other way, I chose to pursue a career in parachute design, striving to prevent such collapses from hurting other people. I spent years testing a one-way valve system for wing parachutes, and eventually patented the invention. Now, thousands of collapse-resistant parachutes soar the skies of the world.

In my pursuit of fearlessness, I have learned something very interesting. Hidden behind the veil of my aversions is the doorway to my success and my happiness. When I work through the challenges that scare me most, I reap innumerable benefits for my soul by breaking through limitation.

I have found the never-ending process of maintaining the balance between fear and joy to be the most enlightening of all of life's experiences. It is the realm in which I feel most awake and alive, and the school in which I have learned many of my most important lessons. The drive to feel completely alive is, after all, what draws us forward into experience. In order to achieve this feeling, many of us are willing to challenge anything that stands before us, and even risk

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death. Ultimately, I have realized that I am simply more afraid of not living than I am of dying.

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Fear Is Not Helpful

The belief that fear keeps us safe is the one that holds humanity back more than anything else. The truth is, the connection between fear and safety is a very loose one, at best. Yes, we have been in a state of fear while in dangerous circumstances. Yes, we survived. Does this mean that the state of fear was helpful? That is called a “correlation”. If you were wearing blue socks every time you avoided a car accident, would you attribute your survival to the color of your socks?

Fear is contraction; a state of mind in which we shrink into smaller, less capable versions of ourselves; unable to realize our full potential in the world. When we are in danger, we do not need to be afraid. It doesn't help. In fact, it makes things much worse. All we really need to do is remain calm and pay attention to our surroundings.

Every time you extricated yourself from danger,
it was because you made the correct choices.

You survived in spite of your fear,
not because of it.

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Cave of the Winds

When I was a student at the University of Vermont, I was very active in the Outing Club. The club was a group of like-minded adventurers, open to any and all outdoor experiences.

There was talk of a deep cave on the top of the tallest mountain in Vermont, Mount Mansfield. We didn't know anyone who had found it, but the rumors abounded, so we figured it must be real. So we packed up the climbing gear, headlamps, and a bit of food for the day and set out for the cave.

I have no idea how we found it. I guess it was fate, or just dumb luck, but here we were, looking into the large A-framed entrance of the infamous Cave of the Winds. About fifty feet into the cave's entrance, there was a large boulder. We climbed over the megalith and looked over and down into the darkness. It went down, straight down.

I have been technical rock climbing since I was a kid, so setting up a rappel was no big deal. Since I was the only climber, I spent ten minutes or so teaching the other guys how to rig up and descend once I was down. In retrospect, we should have let it go and walked away with our victory of having discovered the cave, but hell, we were 20 years old and invincible.

The cave was wet and cold. Water ran down the vertical walls, and as I got deeper into the darkness, the rock turned to ice. None of us had seen that coming, as it was still only September. I guess that cotton long-sleeve t-shirt wasn't the

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best choice. Later I learned that in mountaineering circles, cotton is referred to as the “fabric of death”.

I rappelled down to a large chock–stone that was wedged in between the two walls, which had tapered down to about five feet apart. The others managed to descend to my level, which was about 100 feet down into the cave. We celebrated. We did what few had done. It was a great day.

Then it came time to ascend back up the rope. In our reveling, we neglected to notice that the end of our one and only rope had fallen down a small hole that led down, down, down. I tried pulling it back up, but it was stuck. The way the rope had jammed itself, there was too much tension on it for us to get safely back up. So I rigged up for another rappel.

The lower part of the cave was small. It was basically a tube of ice with water running down into the abyss. I progressed slowly, as the cave began to constrict around my body. The friction device, called a “figure eight descender” was now pressed against my shivering belly. What had I gotten myself into?

Suddenly I felt ground beneath my feet. I had reached the bottom. The room at the base of the Cave of the Winds was not the cathedral–ceiling stalagmite–filled palace that I had hoped it would be, but a three–foot by three–foot hole in the center of the mountain. Nevertheless, here I was: at the bottom, the very bottom.

I sat for a while, partly because I was exhausted, and partly because I wanted to savor the moment. I had managed to go where very few

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people had ever gone. I untangled the rope from the stick that was frozen to the cave bottom and coiled it neatly so that it would pull up cleanly. I meditated for a few minutes, and then started back up the rope.

Modern climbers use devices called “ascenders” to climb fixed ropes. I was 20 years old. I’d barely had enough money to buy a rope. Instead, I relied on an ancient ascending method called “prusiking”. The climber knots two loops of tubular webbing around the rope, looping one around the foot, and the other to the harness. You stand on your foot-strap while you slide up the knot for your seat, then sit down and slide up the one for your foot. It is a slow process, but it has gotten thousands of people up thousands of ropes. Dry ropes, that is.

Everything was wet. The rope was drenched, and so were the prusik straps. By the time I got half way up to my friends, the webbing had begun to freeze. I struggled with the knots but it was no use, they were as hard as rocks. Just then, everything went dark. The D-cell batteries in my headlamp chose this moment to fall out, cascading down the vertical ice-tunnel into the black.

Most people think they have experienced darkness. As a shrink-in-training, I was taught never to invalidate the experiences of another, but I am going to do that now. When you are hanging from a wet rope, 150 feet down in a cave, shivering in darkness so rich that you can’t even see the light of your own thoughts, you get a new sense of the word.

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I struggled to get my footing. I began to panic. My heart pounded faster and faster, and in my frenetic actions I lost my balance and flipped upside down in the darkness.

I was all out of ideas. This was it: the inevitable completion of a journey that I thought was going to be much longer than just 20 years. But here it was: The End. There was nothing left to do but accept it. I hung there silently, like a slab of beef in a meat-locker, beaten.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, something came over me. It was a thought so loud that I almost heard it echoing off the cave walls.

NO!

I was instantly filled with a power and conviction that I had never felt before. My consciousness became perfectly streamlined with one specific goal: I must live.

I took a deep breath, relaxed, and started to climb the wet rope. One hand over the other, I lifted my body toward the surface with rhythmic motions. The flow of the state of consciousness that enveloped my experience was trance-like. There was nothing else in my world but climbing. The power that filled my body was beyond what I could ever conjure up within the confines of my personal sense of self. I had made the shift into what many have called the “transpersonal” state.

By the time I got back up to my friends and orchestrated the rest of our escape, we were all very cold and very tired. We flopped onto the

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ground at the mouth of the cave and looked up at the sky; the stars were out. It was midnight. Time had stopped for us in the underworld, but back on the surface many hours had passed.

We laid on our backs on the rocks at the top of the mountain, gazing up at the stars. Silently we each contemplated the past hours with a sense of awe and bewilderment. We had nearly died.

I realized that it was only when I had surrendered to death that my profound will to live could rise to the surface. The transformation helped me to realize that my will to survive was beyond anything I could have imagined. When I finally calmed down and took deliberate action to escape, I got to see a side of myself that I did not know was there. I realized that I am a survivor.

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Brilliance through Empirical Requirement

When we get lost in the quagmire of negative thinking and allow fear to envelop our experience, it is because we have forgotten something. We have lost touch with the fact that we have tremendous spontaneous capabilities. When we relax, focus and flow with the moment, we have the ability to rise to the challenge with creative solutions and fantastic physical abilities. We are more than we can imagine when we borrow the will of the present moment. This version of “you” responds to reality without reservation. You simply act.

The state of consciousness that leads to greatness does not come as a result of premeditated

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forethought. We do not know what we will do before we do it. Despite our lack of preparatory visualization, we are able to shine. This ability comes as a result of our complete and perfect focus on the present. If we simply trust that we have this ability within us, there is nothing to fear.

“Empirical Requirement” is a force outside us that determines our course of action. When life is unfolding quickly, the reality of the situation dictates our actions. In order to select the correct course of action, simply calm down and look out into the world for clues as to what we should do.

There is something comforting about the simplicity of this state of affairs. When we know that the answers are concrete and in our immediate reality, there is no room for worry. This is exactly why we tend to shine in situations involving physical danger. We act correctly because we have to. There simply is no other choice. We awaken into the present moment because if we do not, we will die.

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Scrambling toward the Surface

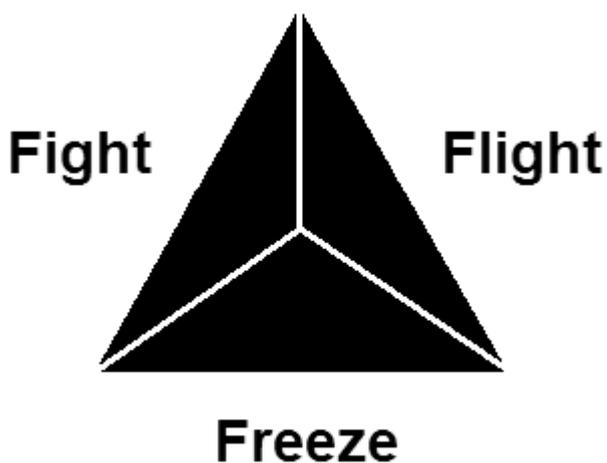
Panic is an emotional, blind striving for survival at all costs. We pull out all our basic survival instincts that have worked in the past and apply them as hard as we can. The truth is that our built-in survival mechanisms may work or they may not. Regardless, it is ultimately our heads that show us the way home.

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Panic is a state of consciousness that wastes mental resources that could otherwise be focused on more important things, like, say, the individual steps that lead to survival. The object of our attention must remain the task at hand, not our fear. This is why we must learn everything we can about the state of fear.

Bravery
is looking into the darkness
to see the light.

The Science of Fear



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What is Fear?

In its most fundamental essence, fear is a defense mechanism. It is a set of preconditioned psychological and physiological responses, designed to help us survive dangerous circumstances. From increased heart rate to an empowering of muscle responses, we are transformed into a turbo-charged version of ourselves that is desperately trying to stay alive.

When the big alarm goes off in our heads, we are left with three general categories of response: Fight, Flight or Freeze. These are all intense states of consciousness, streamlined and sculpted by an evolutionary selection process. At some point in the past, each of these coping behaviors has been instrumental in the survival of individual primates. Those individuals survived long enough to breed and pass on these behavioral traits, either through teaching or the mysterious genetic teaching called instinct.

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Fight, Flight or Freeze

There is sanity at the core of each of the primal response categories. Each state has a specific situation for which it is the best course of action. These “answers” are the means by which some of our own ancestors survived. Our continued existence as a species is due to our collective ability to adapt and implement the correct coping mechanisms in the appropriate context.

The Science of Fear

This is not to say, however, that all individuals will chose the correct response and survive; quite the contrary. Many choose poorly and do not survive the test of adaptability despite such hard-wired programming. Natural selection is an overall effect of survival of the species. Individuals will still die. In other words, the behavioral traits that have been carried forward to the present will not necessarily be the correct answers for modern situations.

Our basic instincts are merely a reflection of the way things were in the past. The stereotypical behaviors that have been handed to us through genetic memory were sculpted for a very different world. In other words, as a modern human, you may in fact be killed by pulling out one of the old faithful responses. Your existence is a roll of the dice when your answers are limited to unconscious choices rather than intelligent responses based on accurate appraisal. This is the problem with instinct. There is no thinking involved.

It is true that mammalian instincts have assisted, at least in part, in the widespread proliferation of our species across the globe. This may be due to the correctness of our instinctive skill set. It may, on the other hand, be due to something else entirely. It is quite possible that global domination of the human animal may have more to do with our ability to let go of the knee-jerk responses handed down from our hairy ancestors and THINK about what is going on around us.

Nevertheless, we do have these old ways about us. Consequently, we are forced to deal with

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our stormy internal nature if we want to gain control over ourselves. In order to tame the animal within us, we must look more closely at these survival mechanisms presented to us by Mother Nature.

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Fight

The state of consciousness called “Fight” is direct resistance: force against force. There are situations in which fighting may be the only remaining course of action. This can involve literal struggle, or a metaphoric resistance against the direction that things are going. Nevertheless, allowing our minds to regress to the fight mode is a very risky proposition, as it can lead to solutions that cause more problems.

Fighting is a Primal Defense Mechanism. It is what animals do when they are cornered. When an individual switches to the attack mode, there is a streamlining of the consciousness. The mind becomes simplified. Due to the apparent lack of other options to diminish the feeling of danger, the mind instantaneously activates the bodily functions that increase the capacity to engage in combat with its surroundings in order to break through barriers that stand between the individual and its safety.

Although it may not be the most graceful extrication from a predicament, there are times when the fight mode is our only option. The sheer power that immediately comes into our hands is not entirely within the control of our thinking