



Managing Fear

Shortly before landing in Buenos Aires I woke up. It was cloudy and windy. I passed through customs and took a taxi to the domestic airport in order to catch my flight to Salta.

By the time I arrived at the other airport the sky was dark and threatening. A huge thunderstorm, like you see only in Central and South America, was moving in. The wind was blowing ferociously. It was eleven in the morning, yet the sky was as dark as night. Surprisingly we boarded the plane for Salta without delays. However, a few minutes after we were taxiing, the plane was called back, a delay as a result of the thunderstorm. I looked at the sky and saw many more dark clouds moving in. After consultation with the tower and a ten-minute delay, the pilot decided to leave.

The plane made a steep ascent to the clouds and got through the first layer before getting tossed around like a little leaf dancing on the wind. The turbulence above the Amazon was *nothing* in comparison to this. We were thrown up, down, left and right. At times it sounded like the airplane was hitting concrete boulders underneath! Yet the pilot skillfully flew around most of the immense cumulus clouds at our designated cruising altitude.

Meanwhile, a tremendous light show was going on outside of the plane. I sat with my nose pushed against the window enjoying the most spectacular lightning display I had ever seen.

A teenager was sitting next to me. Based on his looks, somewhat darker skin and black hair, I guessed he was Argentinean and about eighteen years old. Indeed, as far as I could tell, I was the only foreigner on board.

The boy's hands were cramped anxiously around the seat's arms, his body completely tense. Fear had clearly taken control of him.

"It's okay," I reassured him. "Nothing is going to happen. If this pilot thought things would not have been safe, he would not have taken off. He certainly would not risk his life just to bring us to Salta, would he?"

The boy relaxed somewhat, turned to me and asked, "Are you not afraid?"

"Afraid of what?" I replied.

"Afraid the plane will crash!" The tone in which he said these words sounded exactly like the tone some teenagers in my community took when they thought you were asking them a really stupid question. Only the words, "You dummy!" were missing from his lips.

A few years ago, I had learned during a coaching workshop about the effectiveness of helping people to grow and develop by way of using questions to lead them to certain answers. I had learned that when people find their own answers to problems and challenges, their growth is more substantial and the results are longer-lasting. I had used these coaching techniques to develop superior business teams, and recognized a great coaching opportunity of a different kind had presented itself here. Therefore, I decided to change my line of questioning. Rather than sticking with my original plan of calming the boy, I reckoned I could help him conquer one of his fears. I received great personal satisfaction by helping those around me in this way, and besides, coaching this boy would give me something to do on the flight.

"Why do you fear this plane will crash?" I asked.

"Because we get tossed around so much!"

"I understand," I said, "but that is not what I meant. Why does a plane crash scare you?"

He looked at me with big eyes and an expression on his face that said, "Where does this guy come from? Does he not get it? These gringos are really stupid!" Finally he found his tongue and said, "Because then we will die!"

"And why are you afraid of dying?" I questioned, undeterred.

For a moment his face turned blank in disbelief at the apparent stupidity of the question. Then a frown appeared on his forehead. Ahh, he was finally thinking.

“Well... because....” He paused for some time and asked, “Isn’t everyone afraid to die?”

I was determined not to give him my opinion, but rather to make him analyze the issue further until he found answers of his own. I knew most people in Argentina were Catholic, and I hoped this could function as a useful point of reference that would guide him to a new, fearless perspective on life. “Are you religious?”

“Yes,” and he showed me the little golden cross around his neck.

“Well, what does the Bible teach you about death? Was Jesus afraid of death? What about all the martyrs that were crucified or eaten by the lions in the Roman theaters: Were those Christians afraid of death?”

He thought about the question. Distracted from the storm, his fear faded away and his hands relaxed.

“Well...,” he finally responded, “No. They knew they were going to Heaven.”

“Wouldn’t it be a great adventure if you could travel to Heaven and find out for yourself what it is like?” I asked.

“Well...yes, but what if I wouldn’t go to heaven?”

“I personally do not believe in hell. However, if that’s what you’re afraid of, maybe you can think of something you can do right now which could decide your destiny! According to the Bible, who will go to Heaven?”

“Those who believe and have faith in God.”

“Doesn’t the Bible also say that God is the Almighty?”

With a questioning tone he answered, “Yes?”

“So if God is Almighty, He would not let an airplane crash just by accident, right? It would be part of His bigger plan, of which surely none of us mortals have a complete picture. If we don’t want to die, if we are not prepared to leave this earthly plain yet, aren’t we questioning

His plan and His judgment?” I paused for a second to give him time to think about the question, and then continued, “So is there anything you could still do, according to your religion, that could decide your destiny in death if this plane were to crash?”

He sat there, thinking, until suddenly his face lit up. A light bulb had clearly turned on. “I have never thought about death in such a way!” he energetically replied. “Now I realize that when I can accept whatever will happen to me, I will go to Heaven, because by doing so, I show my ultimate faith in God and my preparedness to follow His greater plan. It is not up to me to question His judgment and plan.” He stayed quiet for some time, and then continued in a somewhat depressed tone, “But this is not easy! Fear sometimes just crawls onto me and takes control over me. How do I prevent this from happening?”

His brain was certainly working, and I liked how far he had taken the subject. Meanwhile, the worst part of the thunderstorm had passed and other than the occasional bump, the flight was now going smoothly. “How do you think the early Christians and Jesus managed their fear and did not allow it to take over when they faced death?”

“Well, they were focused on setting an example.”

“An example of what?” I questioned.

“An example of how to live, of the values they stood for! An example of accepting their destiny with grace! The ultimate example of their faith!” he said adamantly.

“In other words, you are saying they knew what they stood for, what their values were and that no matter what, they would not give up their beliefs and convictions, even if that meant death. So, would it be fair to conclude that when you know what you are about and always stay true to yourself, when you realize you do not control when or how you will die—and die we will all do—and when you have faith that everything happens for a reason according to one master plan, then there is no reason to be afraid of death, or anything else, for that matter?”

“That is right!” the boy said excitedly. “It is not up to me to question what happens to me. I just need to have faith in God’s plan and live like a good Christian. This means I should never betray my values and be open to the lessons God teaches me in all the experiences He presents me with, no matter how bad they seem at first.”

“Did you see that spectacular lightning show when we flew through the thunderstorm?” I asked.

“No,” he responded. “Fear had taken such control of me that I only saw disaster and death in my mind. As a result I did not see anything beautiful. When fear takes over, it prevents you from seeing the beauty of God’s creation. My Incan grandmother taught me that, but despite having that knowledge I have never been able to control my fears. Yet seeing it now, in the context of life and death, it all makes sense.”

“Well, I hope this will help you in terms of managing fear in the future. Yet there is another life-obstructing emotion of which you should be aware: worry, which is just an extension of fear. At times of worry and fear we also miss the lessons and opportunities that are presented to us. I think you’ll discover fear is the biggest hurdle to overcome on your path towards growth and happiness. Always realize that when you are afraid of something, you will grow and understand another piece of this earthly existence and the divine plan by *challenging your fear and conquering it*. The greatest growth always takes place when you find yourself outside of your comfort zone. Young man, what is your name?”

“Mario,” he said, shaking my hand.

“I am Paul. It is nice to meet you, Mario. You are a very smart young man!”

We chatted some more and I learned that Mario lived in Salta and was returning from visiting his grandparents in Buenos Aires. He volunteered to act as my guide in Salta so I would not leave without discovering the town’s hidden treasures. I didn’t know what the hotel owners had in mind for me, so I told him I would call as soon as I had a better idea of my schedule. I was only going to be in Salta for two

nights, so that would not leave me all that much time. Yet deep inside I hoped to be able to take him up on his invitation. It would give me the opportunity to get to know the real Salta and have some conversations that did not revolve around hotels.

Once we landed we shook hands and both of us went our own way. The general manager of the hotel was waiting for me outside of the airport. He was a friendly man in his mid-thirties. In the taxi to the hotel he told me he had moved from Buenos Aires to Salta only two months ago.

“Don’t expect too much! Salta is just a small provincial town, nothing like Buenos Aires,” he stressed.

I was happy to hear that, but had the clear impression he preferred his probably more glamorous life in Buenos Aires.