

# The Twins: Fear and Courage

by David P. Prescott

**F**ear is the fundamental inhibitor to great leadership. It often keeps us from finding our deepest personal authenticity, which in my view is the very essence of excellent leadership. Personal authenticity not only lets us be us—it allows others to be themselves. It opens the way to honest communication and feedback and to relationships that transcend narrow egocentric concerns.

Leadership springing from centered, personal authenticity enables others to stretch beyond their perceived capabilities as they recognize and grow in their own centered authenticity. Such leadership is open to outcomes

beyond individual imaginings or expectations.

Parker Palmer says it this way: “When we are insecure about our own identities, we create settings that deprive other

people of their identities. . . .” A person grounded in his or her true identity (not role), whose authenticity is appropriate and available, has the makings of a great leader.

Fear is common to all of us. It tells us when we are in danger, physical or psychological. In that respect, fear can be

a life-saver. We first learn of fear in childhood. I recall fear of falling off my bicycle the first time I got on it; fear of standing at the edge of a high cliff overlooking a rushing river; fear of not being liked by my classmates in grade school.

As we grow older, we lose our childhood fears and develop others, sometimes irrational, but none the less real. I know a man afraid of getting on an airplane because he fears that his flight will crash. Perhaps his fear is based on a rough flight when he was

in the Navy; perhaps it is because he knew a family that died in a tragic crash. No matter what the genesis, no matter how irrational in view of airline safety statistics, his fear blocks his willingness to get on an

airplane. This same person will drive almost any distance with no inhibition even though driving is statistically more dangerous than flying.

Some of the fears we carry are buried deeply inside us. They are hidden under protective layers built up over time. Such



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constraints of fear to lead with renewed vigor.

Fear of failure is not the only inhibitor to great leadership. Fear of success can be just as prevalent. In his inaugural address to the nation of South Africa in 1994, Nelson Mandela said, “[O]ur deepest fear is not that we are inadequate...” but that “we are powerful beyond measure.” “It is our light,” he went on, “not our darkness, that frightens us most.” It is easy to shy away from the burdens of great responsibility, of decision-making that affects the lives of others. Fear of “letting our light shine” blocks the capacity to lead.

Isaac the Syrian, a 6th century contemplative, said that we all have a “treasure house” within. That is where we find the authenticity that fires great leadership. Fear is the heavy door in front of our own treasure house and courage is the key that unlocks the door. When we unlock the door and walk into the treasure house, we are able to find and claim the fear that holds us back. Courage, then, is the key to outstanding leadership and continuous personal growth.

Courage is the willingness to do whatever is necessary to achieve a goal, even endure pain, physical or psychological. To act with courage means to address fear head on, to do whatever it takes to open the treasure house of personal authenticity that resides in each of us. Bill George, former CEO of

Medtronic, and author of *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*, says that “[A]uthenticity and courage go hand in hand.” In a recent article in *Fast Company* magazine, Senator John McCain, no stranger to pain and suffering, stated, “. . . courage is the enforcing virtue, the one that makes all the other virtues common to exceptional leaders: honesty, integrity, confidence, compassion and humility. In short, leaders who lack courage are not leaders.”

As leaders, we are called to face our fears with courage and resolve. In the words of Isaac the Syrian, we are to “enter eagerly into the treasure house that lies within . . .” where the capacity for outstanding leadership waits to be uncovered.

*—David P. Prescott is Managing Partner of Tarxien Partners, LLC, a leadership enrichment practice. He can be reached at [prescott@tarxien.net](mailto:prescott@tarxien.net). For more information, visit [www.tarxien.net](http://www.tarxien.net).*

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