

Frank Herbert Was Right: Fear Is the Mind-Killer

I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.

Frank Herbert, noted writer of science fiction, was being scientifically *factual* when he included this line in his novel *Dune*. Fear is, in fact, the mind-killer.

Don't get me wrong, fear serves a purpose. There are times when fear is justified, and its effects on our brains and bodies are needed to keep us alive. We've all felt that jolt of adrenaline when something scares us our fight-or-flight reflex readying us to either do battle or dash away and it has served an important evolutionary purpose.

But the increased speed and strength along with the heightened senses, like all things, come with trade-offs. Because the process of fear involves multiple portions of our brains doing complicated things like coordinating the release of various hormones and neurotransmitters and limiting the blood supply to "non-essential" processes (like digestion), it can't do other things as well. According to the [University of Minnesota](#),

Fear can interrupt processes in our brains that allow us to regulate emotions, read non-verbal cues and other information presented to us, reflect before acting, and act ethically. This impacts our thinking and decision-making in negative ways, leaving us susceptible to intense emotions and impulsive reactions. All of these effects can leave us unable to act appropriately.

These side-effects generally fade away once our fear does.

After all, humans aren't built to feel fear constantly. Chronic feelings of fear and anxiety have significant negative effects on our physical health and emotional well-being. Sometimes we can know that our fears aren't rational. But disordered thinking—like post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and panic disorders, and phobias—doesn't listen well to rationality, which is where mental health professionals can help.

So given all of this information, what happens when something serious, like a terrorist attack or a global pandemic, scares us? It's perfectly normal to be scared by something like that. But that state of [fear often prevents us, all of us, from making smart, well-considered decisions](#).

It's difficult and uncomfortable to [work past fear](#). At some level, we know that we don't make our best choices when we're afraid. This drives us to seek out those who seem to be less afraid than we are to make important decisions for us. Generally, the people our modern society looks to are our political leaders.

The problem with that is that our political leaders are just as human as we are. They might have better public relations teams than everyday people, but they're still human. They are still subject to all of the same emotions – like fear – and incentives that the rest of us are. Election to public office does not somehow magically change the fundamental ways that people respond to various stimuli.

We want to believe that our political leaders (at least the ones we rooted for) are full of goodness and light, that they think and legislate justly with only good intentions in their hearts. We want to believe this because we want to believe that we would do that if we were in the same position. But as [Zuri told T'Challa](#) in Marvel's *Black Panther*, "...it's hard for a good man to be king." This coincides with Lord Acton's warning that "power corrupts," what we understand about human

psychology, and what economists call "[public choice theory](#)."

Public choice theory posits that people do not magically become angels upon gaining a position of power, like political office. They are still subject to behavioral incentives like the rest of us. It also states that it's difficult, time-consuming, and – [since it's exceedingly rare for any single vote to sway the results of an election](#) – not particularly beneficial for voters to be especially informed.

Therefore, it's very easy for politicians to become comfortable with their positions of power and seek to secure and/or increase that power (after all, it's *what people do*). It doesn't make sense for voters to keep close tabs on their politicians' behavior because their informed vote weighs just as much as their neighbor's *uninformed* vote (and matters just as little). So bad behavior by politicians is often forgotten or glossed over or just doesn't matter all that much.

Then, the Scary Thing happens: the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 2008 financial crisis, COVID-19. Real problems that are legitimately frightening lead to demands from the citizenry to "Do Something" because they suspect they are too afraid right now to make good decisions for themselves.

Only the politicians are scared, too. They don't want to die in an explosion or be hooked up to a ventilator in the ICU any more than we do. And being just as human and prone to error as we are, they tend to make bad decisions in the heat of the moment.

In the aftermath of 9/11, we saw a *huge* expansion in the power and scope of the US federal government. From the security theater of the TSA to the [broadening of the surveillance state](#), "national security" became the perfect excuse for every extension of government into the daily lives of ordinary, peaceful people. After all, you don't want the terrorists to win, do you?

We're seeing eerily similar expansions of power now during the current COVID-19 outbreak. A great many decisions are, properly, being left to state and local governments. Unfortunately, the power granted, and then exercised, by state-and local-level state-of-emergency declarations are revealing just how many would-be tyrants we have in office. Businesses have been [ordered closed](#), [curfews instated](#), [travel restricted](#), [prices controlled](#), all with [disastrous](#) and [heartbreaking effects](#).

True, a great many [burdensome and, frankly, pointless regulations](#) have been lifted in an effort to slow the economic bleeding and help get much-needed goods and services to medical personnel. But [an economy is not a machine](#). It can't just be turned off for a few weeks or months and be expected to run just like it used to when it's allowed to start back up again.

A lot of people are sick, and some of them are dying. That is tragic and terrifying, and I don't want to make light of it. As a member of a high-risk category, I'm all too aware of the risks and the what-ifs and the worry. I know the fear.

But if [our own recent history](#) has taught us anything, it's that we must not give in to the fear. We must not let ourselves give away the things that make life worth living on the off-chance that doing so will somehow shield us from harm. Our [freedom is our hope and our happiness](#), and it is mighty. But once we allow it to be taken from us, it's incredibly difficult to gain it back.

That first [quotation from Frank Herbert](#) goes on:

I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past, I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone, there will be nothing. Only I will remain.

This crisis will end, as all things end. That is not in question.

The question that does exist, however, is when the smoke has cleared and we emerge from our quarantines, will we have faced our fears, permitted them to pass over and through us, and remain free individuals? Or will we, in a flash of terror, have allowed ourselves to be bound by the dictates of others?

Worse still, will many of us have asked for it?

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This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#).

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