

Facing Fear: Childhood Autobiography

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Since my birth in 1943, Fear has been my constant companion. After a lifetime of diligent work, mortaring one brick of courage to another, I have painstakingly built a deep well, filled with strength, from which I draw the resolve to confront and overcome my worst fears. I do not know the origins of the instinct that compelled me to face those apparently unfaceable terrors, and I do not know why I drew this particular life-challenge or what drove me to overcome. Why me? Who was I? What was important to me? I look to my early childhood memories for the answers.

My impressions of what I looked like are vague—a small, round child with big, brown eyes and luxuriant hair. Mostly, my world centered on my own feelings and responses, where I lived and how others reacted to me. Boisterous, industrious, healthy, talented, intelligent, generous, good-looking, clean—these are the adjectives that pop into my mind when I think about my family. We were seven in all: Mom, Dad, and five of us children with fierce pride in ourselves, in our American Indian heritage on my father's side, in our family's strong working-class resourcefulness, in our honesty and integrity—instilled deeply by my mother's indefatigable will.

We lived on 14th Street in Thermalito, an unincorporated suburb of Oroville in Northern California. In those days, our street was delightful—semi-rural with fig and olive orchards, pastures, and old houses overshadowed by mammoth walnut, chestnut, and elm trees.

Our home continually grew and changed as Daddy, under Mom's meticulous directions, added rooms and remodeled to accommodate our growing needs. I thought it the nicest house in Thermalito, sprawling and comfortable on a huge lot lined with lilac bushes and fig trees. Our property rested on a gently sloping hill, and behind the house we kept chickens.

I had a strong aversion to the small chicken shack that doubled as Daddy's workshop. It was small, dark, and smelled of oil, gasoline, feathers, shit, and blood. Its one redeeming feature was the cozy, eye-level incubating area where I would watch the fuzzy, yellow chicks pecking hungrily at the grain in long feed-troughs under soft, warming lights.

Connected to the shack was a large fenced yard bustling with Rhode Island Red and White leghorn chickens that scratched and cackled and scurried. The monarch over this kingdom, a large white rooster, kept the hens busy and flustered by continually herding and chastising them.

Every week Daddy would catch several chickens and, with a well-battered axe, chop off their heads. The blood would spurt from their necks, and their bodies would jump and twitch. Once I saw a headless chicken run, or rather dance, in strange frenzied movements. It was still dancing when Daddy flung down a spurting partner that immediately jerked up like a puppet on a string and joined in a crazed dervish. I remember being distressed because the second chicken wasn't in step or as graceful as the first as they danced about

in interlocking circles. I watched, numbly removed from my body, mesmerized. What if their tangents should converge? Collision! Collision would force them to realize they were already dead. This possibility seemed far more horrible than their blind flight from the axe. After that, no matter what I was doing, when I saw Daddy purposefully stride down to the chicken house, I felt stillness within, a chilling expectancy.

Behind the chicken yard lay a small horse paddock and beyond that a five acre pasture grown wild with tall, thick-stemmed water-grass and hay that dried like straw in the summer and towered over our young heads in thick patches. Without a doubt, the pasture was our favorite place, and we had honeycombed it with tunnels and pathways that provided the perfect setting for tag, kick-the-can, or hide-and-seek. I loved to throw my child-sized body into the thick straw, for no matter how hard I jumped, I always landed cushioned at an angle, and I would lie there hidden, surrounded by soft, pale gold, watching the blue sky and the blue, iridescent, winged dragonflies, dreaming beautiful fantasies with graceful endings, or thinking of nothing at all.

All the ingredients necessary for a happy childhood were mine: a warm, stable family, a friendly home, an infinitely interesting and pleasing rural environment, but my fear ruined it for me. I was born afraid. As an infant, Mom says that I cried not because I was hungry or wanted to be held or had dirty diapers—I cried because I was scared. Until the age of three, whenever a strange man came near (perhaps to say hello to Mom and admire me) I would scream a scream that Mom describes as “blood-curdling.” My family, understandably, reacted to me with varying degrees of puzzlement, frustration, embarrassment, anger, and eventually, avoidance.

My first conscious memory, as a child of three-and-a half, is of resolving to face a fear. How clearly my mind has captured that experience, pigeonholed it in that part of my brain which dictates that this memory is not to be altered or forgotten. Pertinent details from the day preceding my resolution are interwoven into the whole picture.

I remember that it was Sunday because the family was at home. The sun shone warm and friendly, and my world focused upon the laughter and excited activities of my siblings and their friends. Feeling like they were trying to run away from me, I confusedly tagged along behind as the collective mass shifted from one play to another, not unlike beds of seaweed that flow in and out with the tides. Suddenly, as if a particularly strong wave had grabbed them, they pivoted, streaming down to the pasture, the tallest in the lead.

Two possible routes led to the pasture. The long way, through the orchard, I found undesirable because it took too much effort to plod through the ditches and over the rough-tilled soil that was further obstacle with a huge brush pile and a barbed-wire fence. The obvious way, short and direct, was through the chicken yard, the horse corral, and under a wooden slated gate.

Although I had occasionally been asked to feed the chickens and therefore had been in the yard alone, I avoided it whenever possible. I was afraid of the notoriously mean rooster, who was as big as I when his wings were extended. Looking back, I remember that his eyes were not just mean, they were malevolent. He would watch me intently with a cruel,

conscious intelligence and knew that I was afraid of him. He was the only being in my world with whom I had established eye contact—who really saw me. I wanted to beg the others to go the long way around to the pasture, but I remember thinking, “They don’t like me when I’m afraid. I can’t let them know I’m afraid.” So gathering all my courage, I followed. Of course, they being older and bigger had reached the pasture before I was halfway through the yard, and every instinct within me screamed that that rooster was going to hurt me in some undefined manner. What relief I felt when I was beyond his reach. Later, I purposefully lagged behind, so I could sneak home unobserved through the safe, obstacle orchard.

On the next fateful day, I was alone. My teenage sister, Doris, was visiting with a friend in the house and taking care of my infant sister, Donna. She considered me a bother, so I amused myself outside. I decided to go to the pasture, which in itself was a major decision since I was too young and had not gone by myself before. My desire to take an action that seemed dangerous was already intrinsic to my character. I knew where I wanted to be and only needed to decide which route to take to get there. I remember feeling scared to depths of my being, feeling small, insignificant, and powerless as I stood there in my printed, cotton dress with my hand on the latch of the chicken yard gate, debating with myself at length, reasoning thus: “The others aren’t afraid. I wasn’t hurt yesterday. Everyone tells me I should not be afraid. There is nothing to be afraid of.” So with great determination, I entered through the gate.

Moments later, that rooster became airborne, attacking me, tearing my world apart, shrieking his fury at my face. Talons, sharpened by scratching, fighting, lusting, pierced my scrawny arm, gripping it viciously. Flailing, beating feathers paralyzed me, tornados of flurry sucked my breath away, white panic battered me, blinded me, drowned me, warped out sound, plunged me into voids between fear and frantic. My screams summoned Doris, who swooped down to my rescue.

I have no memory of the next several hours. Vaguely, bits and pieces began to register like jumbled photographic stills: finding myself safely nestled in my brother’s knotty-pine bedroom, the most desired, private, and comfortable room in the house—usually off-limits to me. Mom, clean and pretty in her white nurse’s uniform, rushing in from work, her face full of concern, fear, relief. JoAnn, two-and-a-half years older than I, excited, concerned, giving me periodic reports on the family’s reactions, telling me my brother, Ben, had tied my attacker and another rooster to the clothesline and was torturing it to death. Even at that young age, the thought of any creature suffering pain was abhorrent to me, and although I wanted that rooster to disappear, I did not want it tortured. Years later, much to my relief, Ben told me he had killed it without torture.

Somehow, through all the tiptoeing, the whispering, the special room, and concerned faces, a new revelation came to me: They cared about me, loved me. I did not leave that room to save the rooster or even to relieve my bladder because that moment was magic, and I never wanted it to end.

I learned a great deal from that rooster attack and have escaped unscathed in my subsequent experiences of facing fear. I learned to trust my own intuition. The others were

wrong to tell me I had nothing to fear. Danger exits. It lurks everywhere, and nobody is exempt from harm. But hurt does not necessarily mean death or loss of identity. The attack was not as damaging as my fear of being hurt. Giving into fear made me feel inadequate, like a failure. Facing fear has given me confidence and self-pride. Instead of earning me the disgust of others, it has earned me their respect and acceptance.

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Please note that I wrote the “attack” paragraph as a prose poem because ordinary language could not communicate the nightmarish jumble of emotions and perceptions I was experiencing. I have come to believe that I was not fully in my body until this incident and was still clinging to the safety of the astral plane. The complete prose poem follows:

The Rooster tears the night apart; it shrieks malevolent rages at my face. Talons sharpened by scratching and struggle lusts pierce my scrawny three-year old baby arm, clutching it with grasp and vicious attachment. Flailing, beating feathers paralyze me; tornados of flurry smother me, sucking away air—breath; frenzies of white panic overwhelm me, blinding me, drowning me, warping out sound, placing me between voids of fear and frantic. Seconds or eternity are one and the same when the rooster rips reality apart, and I am left sobbing, dissembled.

The mystics tell us that as young children we spend time in both the astral and this, our own familiar plane. But how cruel the shock of this savage and malicious act—to wield the rooster as a cosmic tool and so abruptly incarnate me whole, in my body at last.

