

Mr Fear

I knew my country was screwed a few years ago, as I waited one night for a taxi at the Cambridge railway station.

So – the taxi rank at the Cambridge railway station works like any other taxi rank. Passengers queue up at the taxi rank. When a taxi comes along, whoever is at the head of the queue gets into the taxi and everyone else in the queue moves up one space and waits for more taxis to come along. Except on the night I am thinking of, when a few people at the head of the queue of passengers got into a taxi, the person who was next in line did not move up. The space between where they were standing and the start of the taxi rank was too large for them. It's one thing to shuffle forward a yard or so to take up the place of the person who was in front of you: it's quite a different thing to take a few steps forward and take a risk that everyone behind you will not follow your example. So the person at the front of the queue preferred to stay put and when the next taxi came along, it stopped alongside them and they got into the taxi. Now the next person in line had a choice – did they move up to the start of the taxi rank, or would they follow the previous passenger's example and stay put? They chose to do exactly the same as the previous passenger and stayed put, and when the next taxi came along, it stopped alongside this passenger and they got in. The next person at the head of the queue wasn't going to do anything different and so they too stood still and didn't move to the top of the taxi rank. And so it went on – each passenger who took their turn at the head of the queue refused to move forward at all, with the result that the gap between the head of the queue and the start of the taxi rank grew bigger and bigger and bigger, thus increasing the pressure on whoever was next in line to stay where they were, and not make the big move of walking to the top of the taxi rank in the hope that everyone behind them would follow their example. So the position of the head of the queue moved further and further away from the start of the taxi rank as each person at the head of the queue got into a taxi without anyone moving up – and because the queue was just not moving forward at any point, the back of the queue, which was being added to regularly as passengers getting off trains arriving at Cambridge joined the queue, snaked so far away that some passengers were having to stand in some bushes way behind the taxi rank in order to assume their place in the queue.

I was in the queue, some way back, observing all this happen. Two thoughts were running through my mind. First – I am definitely marching to the top of the taxi rank if and when I get to the head of the queue. Secondly – we are so screwed as a country: if people don't have the moral courage to walk a few paces to the top of a taxi rank for fear that the people behind them won't follow them and they'll be left out on their own, what hope is there for us? And there is none. But just because the majority allow themselves to be dominated by fear, that is no reason for you to follow their example. And it is especially important for you as a student that you don't make friends with Mr Fear because he will screw everything up for you. Unfortunately, so many students allow themselves to be ruled by fears of one kind or another. They reverse President Roosevelt's mantra, 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself' – the only thing they are unafraid of is being afraid. Let's run through some characteristic student fears, and see how these fears screw everything up.

I observe in my students four chief fears:

(1) *Fear of failure*. This fear isn't the fear of failing exams: not many students are silly enough to think that that is a realistic possibility. No – the fear of failure kicks in at the opposite end of the spectrum, among students who know that they have it them to do really

well but fear that if they work hard to realise their talent, their efforts might not end up being rewarded and they will end up getting the same kind of averagely good mark that they could have got with very little effort. A lot of students, confronted with this fear, opt not to go for the gold but instead settle for bronze. There is some consolation in that: you cannot be said to have failed if you never really tried. But it results in such a waste of potential. If you find yourself being affected by this fear, think about all the things that would be missing from your life if people didn't try to achieve something great for fear that they would never achieve it: all the amazing music, and books, and films that have touched you, all the relationships that were responsible for your being here in the first place and for your developing into the person you are, all the wonderful tools and gadgets that people laboured thousands of hours over to make your life easier or to allow you to do things that were previously impossible. And ask yourself: am I really going to enjoy all these things and not make the same leap that was responsible for these things existing? Am I really going to sit life out for fearing of not achieving everything that I might be capable of achieving?

(2) *Fear of being different.* It was the fear of being different that was ultimately responsible for the collective act of stupidity at the Cambridge railway station taxi rank a few years ago. No one was willing to break out, and be different from everyone else and try to show a bit of leadership. But the fear of being different is a killer for students. Because being excellent *means* being different. If you are excellent, you excel – you rise above the norm, the average. If you are excellent, you are, by definition, different. So if you are scared of being in any way marked out as being different from everyone else, then you cannot ever achieve any kind of personal excellence. The only way of overcoming this fear, like most other fears, is to experience what you are scared of and realise that what you are scared of is ultimately – nothing. If you are scared of being different, be different and see what it's like. You'll find it's not so bad, and in fact it's a lot better than always being one of a crowd.

(3) *Fear of being judged.* This is perhaps the most human fear: the fear of other people looking down on you. So much effort in people's lives goes into trying to avoid being looked down on by other people. That's what accounts for all the time spent acquiring status symbols, and worrying where you stand in relation to other people. Life becomes a huge arms race, with people attaching status and significance to one set of things after another in an endless quest for high ground from which they will be immune from others' sneers and be able instead to look down on others themselves. But the fear of being judged, however human, is a killer for students. It shuts you up and prevents you expressing yourself in class or on paper – for fear of what other people will think of what you have to say. But in law in particular it is essential to learn how to express yourself, because law is a speaking game above everything else. If you cannot express yourself, you cannot be a lawyer. So how can you overcome this most human fear and allow yourself, by expressing yourself, to make yourself vulnerable to being judged by other people? Just as with the previous fear, the only way is to take the plunge and realise – even if you screw up and other people look down on, it's actually not that bad. It hurts a bit, and you feel a bit wounded – but it's not so bad. And any smart to your soul that you may experience is more than outweighed by the feeling of liberation you simultaneously experience when you realise that you don't have to worry about being judged by other people any more. That you can express yourself and be yourself without being concerned about whether other people will look down on you as a result. So take the plunge and then you'll see. But you need to make an act of faith and take that plunge.

(4) *Fear of change.* This is another big fear that afflicts students entering university. And why shouldn't it? They have been relatively successful in their studies so far – so why mess with

what has been, up to now, a winning formula? As a result, students entering university tend to hug quite closely to patterns of studying and revision that have worked for them at school, only to find that what worked for them at school is radically inadequate for dealing with the quite different challenge of studying at university. Most students – by going through the bitter experience of failure early on in their university studies – find it quite easy to give up on their fear of change. Failure makes them willing to embrace change. But why wait that long? Be open from day one of your studies to making changes to the way you approach your work that will help you work more effectively and happily at university.