

NOTE TO READER:

YOU CAN SKIP THE FIRST SEVEN PARAGRAPHS TO START RIGHT
IN ON THE EXERCISE IF YOU'D LIKE

**EXCERPT FROM “DECONSTRUCTING ANXIETY:
THE JOURNEY FROM FEAR TO FULFILLMENT”**

by

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CHAPTER 8

DIGGING FOR GOLD

Finding the Core Fear

The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.

—Joseph Campbell

It is time now to bring these principles to life, freeing ourselves from anxiety and opening up to the fulfillment we seek. We will start with exercises for finding the core fear, the source of all our

difficulties, and the chief defense, that which preserves and agitates the core fear. Next we will discover how to dismantle the chief defense so that we may face the core fear (the correct fear underneath our struggles) and find it has no power over us. As we do so, we will become highly skilled in withdrawing the projections that create our picture of reality, the manifest forms of the core fear and chief defense. This naturally results in a transformation of personality as well. We stand as the creator of our experience rather than a creature bound to it, free to choose a path that serves our higher purposes. The distortions of fear have dissolved and we have an unobstructed view of the truth they were hiding.

So we begin with finding the right fear to face, now understood as the core fear. Digging through the layers of defense that have concealed it, the deceptions and manipulations that have distorted it, we will find the “gold” waiting at the bottom. Our technique for doing so represents a major breakthrough in finding the true cause of suffering in our life. It is a powerful, remarkably fast, and effective way of getting to the root of things in the unconscious. It is the cornerstone of our model, the foundation for freedom and fulfillment, and the gateway to everything else we will be doing.

The process for finding your core fear, Digging for Gold, is vital. Like an archaeologist, we will literally be excavating the layers of our unconscious, looking for the buried treasure at the bottom. It's impossible to overstate the importance of seeing the core fear at work inside us. Doing so is what enables us to withdraw our ill-fated projections and choose a different approach. This is an essential tool for transforming our life at the source.¹

The exercise for finding your core fear is about deconstructing, step-by-step, the surface presentation of a problem to find the original fear hiding at its foundation. Performing this exercise, you will see that underneath any problem you have—any suffering you experience, any obstacle to fulfillment—is one core fear. Every time.² To discover this for yourself can be truly eye-opening, even life-changing. It reveals the secret culprit behind whatever disturbs your peace, the anonymous core fear that pulls the levers and turns the dials of your perception. Performing the exercise, we will witness the power of the core fear to drive our beliefs, our decisions, and our very personality. The entire structure of our worldview springs from the dictates of this single interpretation about how life works, made early on in childhood and accumulating associations, memories, and further interpretations throughout our life.

We will further see that our core fear takes many faces, explaining why we suffer from constantly shifting identities and endlessly variable moods. If our core fear is of losing love, for instance, it might masquerade as a fear of dying. But with this exercise we will find that underneath the fear of dying—the real reason we are afraid of it—is the fear of being cut off from

those we love. Without this core fear, our interpretation of death would be very different. Of course, we have a fear of death, but it's not always primarily about the fear of losing loved ones. If the loss of love is one's core fear, it consumes them, showing up in myriad different circumstances. It is what generates their fear and suffering—not fundamentally a concern about dying. Everyone is born with a profound fear of death, but it comes to mean different things for each of us. The same is true, of course, for the other four core fears; our interpretation of them depends on our original contact with fear and the lessons we learned from our exposure to it.

Remember too that when we experience our core fear, we may experience some of each of the other core fears as well, which is why it can sometimes be confusing to pick one. One is still predominant, however, and it is important to get a very clear picture of your unique core fear. Ultimately, it's not the labels of the five core fears but this picture—the living experience of it—that matters. You are not trying to force your experience to fit the label but merely using the label as a guide to give parameters for insight.

The exercises for finding your core fear and chief defense, taken together, are a remarkably fast and powerful way to uncover the deep structure of your personality, revealing exactly who you are, how you perceive life, and why you make the decisions you do. Of course the insight you can get from doing these exercises once will not be as complete as when you do them repeatedly. To glean their full benefit, you'll want to apply the exercises to a variety of circumstances, seeing that indeed, the many faces of your anxieties, problems, and upsets all boil down to one core fear and one chief defense.³

EXERCISE FOR FINDING YOUR CORE FEAR: DIGGING FOR GOLD

This exercise and the next are best done by writing in a journal, though they will soon become so familiar that you'll be able to do them in your head. Begin by picking a problem, any problem, big or small. It doesn't matter which one. All problems, as we will demonstrate with this exercise, lead to the core fear. As you conceive of the problem you want to work with, write it in a single short phrase at the top left of the page (see template below). On the same line at the top right of the page, write down one of these three questions in response to the problem:

1. Why is that upsetting to you?
2. What Are You Afraid Will Happen Next?

3. What Are You Afraid You Will Miss Or Lose?

Each of these is a different form of the question “What is the fear underneath this problem?” The answer will get you one level “deeper,” one step closer to your core fear.

It’s important to state the problem in a short phrase (to circumvent any chance of making it too complex or losing the gist) and to state it in a way so you can ask one of the three questions. For example, you wouldn’t want to say, “I need to be able to pay my bills” because this doesn’t state an actual problem, or at least, one that you can ask these questions of. Rather, you would want to write, “I can’t pay my bills.”

Choose whichever of the three questions is most helpful for getting an answer. One is not better than another. You are simply looking for the one that helps define the fear underneath the first problem. Of course, if you need to change the wording slightly to facilitate an answer, by all means do so.⁴ If you feel stuck with one of the questions, try another. With practice, you’ll find that the question “Why is that upsetting to you?” being general and open, is usually more helpful for the first line or two of questioning. “What are you afraid will happen next?” because it lends itself to more specific answers, is often the best question throughout the middle of the process. And “What are you afraid you will miss or lose?” is frequently most effective at the end because it suggests a core fear, a statement about fundamental loss.

Having written down your problem and asked one of the questions, you’ll write the answer on the second line of the left of the page, underneath the first. Again, make sure your answer is written in a short phrase without extraneous detail. Make sure as well that it describes a new problem that is one layer “deeper” than the first and of which you can ask another of the questions. You are looking for an answer that gets underneath the problem above it, explaining what the fear behind that problem is. An important point: watch out for a “repetitive loop” when the answer you come up with is actually a restatement of the problem above. For instance, “I can’t pay my bills” and “I’ll get behind in my payments” are really the same problem dressed differently. One doesn’t explain the fear underneath the other . . . you haven’t gotten a level deeper with that answer. Rather, if we say, “I can’t pay my bills” and then ask, “Why is that upsetting to me?” the answer might be “The electricity will get turned off.” This gets us closer to the core, to what’s really going on under the surface.

Write whichever of the three questions is most helpful on the second line on the right side, answering with a third-level problem on the left side underneath the one before. Continue this process until you get to the core, and then summarize your core fear in, again, a short, succinct phrase.

Be careful not to skip steps as you go through the questions; it’s important not to make any

leaps in thinking but to fill in all the blanks. For instance, if your problem is that you don't have enough money, your answer to "What are you afraid will happen next?" might be "I'll end up on the streets." While the connection may seem obvious, it's important to fill in each missing step meticulously, such as "If I don't have enough money, I'm afraid what will happen next is that I won't be able to pay my bills," followed by "If I can't pay my bills, I'm afraid what will happen next is that I will get evicted," and then "If I get evicted, no one will take me in," and finally, "If no one will take me in, I'll be out on the street." Each of these intervening steps is full of meaning specific to your history and the development of your core fear, as we will see.

If one of the questions isn't yielding a ready answer, try a different one. If you feel stuck, it can be helpful to think how others might answer the question (your answer will still come from your core fear). It can also be helpful to visualize the process as if you were watching a movie. Begin the movie with your original problem and follow each step of what you are afraid will happen next. Make sure you watch the movie of your fear come true rather than a movie in which you are looking for solutions. Our goal at this point is to uncover our core fear. We don't want to use old strategies for escaping or resolving it before we fully appreciate what it is we want to escape or resolve. But watching your fear play out as if on a movie screen can make the process feel safer (providing detachment) and clearer as well. You simply watch what happens next on the movie screen. If you anticipate that you might become uncomfortable (which is, again, very unlikely), it can help to remember that you've already been living with the fear. Acknowledging it doesn't make it more real. By performing the exercise you are merely discovering what has been going on behind the scenes the whole time. This can actually be quite satisfying, instilling hope that you are on the trail of finding answers.

You will know you have arrived at the core fear when asking any of the three questions brings up the same answer over and over . . . you have already arrived at the deepest level and there is nowhere further to go. You'll also know you have arrived when you get an answer that has a universal, fundamental quality to it, some form of the five core fears we mentioned earlier: loss of love, identity, meaning, purpose, and the fear of death. Try to make a direct connection to one of these five—it will help clarify your thinking. The answer you get will explain the thought system at the very core of your personality, that which is behind every interpretation and decision you make. Be prepared to discover significant connections about why your life took the course it did, profound "Aha!" moments, as the puzzle pieces come together making sense out of the major, minor, and everyday choices you have made. This can bring a momentous, sometimes life-changing awareness of that which defines your personality, who you "are." It is often accompanied by powerful emotions, as well as the beginning realization that we are free to choose a different way of being.⁵

This exercise can sometimes evoke memories of the original incident that created your core fear as well as later occurrences that recapitulated it, with lots of spontaneous flashbacks. It's not necessary, however, to remember the original incident since "the past lives on in the present" (M. Pressman, 1999). The original incident is made plain in our present experiences because it

is responsible for them. Each present moment, until free of fear, is a recapitulation of the original in disguise.

Here is a template for what the layout of this exercise looks like:

Digging for Gold: Finding Your Core Fear

The three questions:

1. Why is that upsetting to you?
2. What Are You Afraid Will Happen Next?
3. What Are You Afraid You Will Miss Or Lose?

Problem: _____ Question: _____ Answer _____

(new problem): _____ Question: _____ Answer (new problem): _____

_____ Question: _____ Answer (new problem): _____

_____ Question: _____ Answer (new problem): _____

_____ Question: _____ Answer (new problem): _____

_____ Question: _____ Core fear: _____

TIPS FOR MASTERING THE TECHNIQUE

Defenses (and the resistance they inspire) can always arise to “protect” one from finding their core fear no matter how clear the technique. As simple and straightforward as it appears, this exercise can involve a good deal of finesse to negotiate through resistance. Still it is virtually foolproof, especially if the instructions are followed closely. Here are several troubleshooting

points to become masterful with it.

- It doesn't matter what problem you start with, big or small, since all are manifestations of the core fear. You will therefore arrive at the same answer—your core fear—regardless of the problem you start with. Some people demonstrate resistance from the start by worrying about which problem to choose (in which case, you can start with the problem “I'm afraid I won't pick the right problem”).
- Ask whichever of the three questions is most helpful or applicable to the problem written on the left. One may suggest an answer that makes it easier to see yourself in than another.
- Make sure the answer states a problem, one that you can ask one of the three questions of. This may seem unnecessary, but again, it's important to be meticulous in following these directions if we are to be skillful in avoiding resistance.
- As noted above, watchout for a“repetitive loop” when you actually restate the same level of the problem in a different form. The task is to get one level deeper, one level closer to the core fear.
- You don't want to skip steps even if you think you know where the exercise is going or are already sure of your core fear. In fact, the more detailed you make it, recording each step in your thought process, the more effective it will be
- Be very specific in your answers. Abstraction is a defense against looking at the fear. Describe what you think will actually happen (in real time), what you'll actually miss or lose. For example, rather than saying, “My head will explode,” try “I'll feel overwhelmed and unable to move.” Instead of “Everything will fall apart,” you'd want to say, “I won't be able to keep up with daily responsibilities,” or even more specifically, “I won't keep up with some particular responsibility.”
- To help with specificity, you can visualize the problem as if it were happening on a movie screen. Make sure your answers to the questions describe what you see visually on the movie screen. This forces us to become literal and concrete about what is upsetting us, what we are afraid will happen next, or what we are afraid we'll miss or lose. Rather than vague emotional descriptions, we describe what we imagine would actually happen in real time and space, as seen on the movie screen.

- Don't be limited in your answers by thinking rationally. Our fears are, by definition, distortions and may seem ridiculous, but we believe them nevertheless. One person who went through the exercise couldn't think of what she was afraid would happen next after getting vulnerable with her partner. All she could see was that she would "feel badly." I invited her to watch the movie of her fear, visualizing a specific scene where she was vulnerable, and not to worry if it was realistic. She then described a scene where her husband would stare into her eyes, looking for connection. In the next scene, she described her fear that he would "swallow me up, sucking the life out of me until I was like a limp rag on the floor." I asked then, "What are you afraid you'll miss or lose?" and she replied, "The chance to do what I want; I'd be too drained and would end up living a meaningless life." With this, she found her core fear—a loss of meaning. She further realized that she had been defending against this her whole life ever since seeing her mother go through exactly the same thing.
- If there are two or more possible answers at any level in this process (i.e., two or more possible fears), pick either one. It doesn't matter which one because, again, they will all end up in the same place . . . at the core.
- Another device to help if you get stuck at any point is to imagine this is someone else's problem. Our resistance, of course, is heightened when thinking about our own fear versus someone else's.
- This process is actually quite simple, the answers to the questions, obvious—there are usually only a handful of options in any situation. But resistance can get sticky and our defenses can obscure the obvious. If, for example, you can't think of the answer to one of the questions, the problem may be a defense of perfectionism (hiding the fear of not having the perfect answer). In response, you can simply make your best guess. If you are a therapist working with a client, you can guess for them. The only proviso, and this is important, is that you not impose your interpretation upon your client when making such a guess. Doing so runs the risk of projecting your own core fear onto their experience. It's crucial to remember that the client's core fear might be making a very different interpretation than your own. As therapists, we have experience with the variety of usual interpretations people make so it can be helpful to offer suggestions. But you never want to assume you know unless you have prior experience with the client and really understand their background.⁶
- Another possible solution if stuck in answering the questions is to go to the extreme (as our fear inevitably does). Ask yourself, "What's the worst-case scenario, what would

eventually happen in the end if the whole thing fell apart, if I could never get out of the situation, if I lost all control over it, etc.?” Sometimes we get caught up with the concrete details of a situation and need this approach to globalize, again, as our fear is wont to do. For instance, if someone begins the process with an anxiety that they have not kept in shape, he may answer the question “Why is that upsetting to you?” by saying, “If I go up to a woman, she might reject me.” Asking “What are you afraid will happen next?” might then lead to “I’ll be in pain,” and he won’t be able to go further than that. To get to the core fear, he would want to generalize from rejection by a specific woman to rejection by all women . . . forever. He would then be able to answer “What are you afraid will happen next?” by saying, “I’ll always be alone and never find love.” Similarly, the woman mentioned above who was afraid she would be left “like a limp rag on the floor” had to imagine that she would be there forever, with no chance of escape, before she was able to see her core fear of losing meaning.

- If our fear is about the well-being of someone we love or care about, we still ask the same questions because it is our fear about what might happen to them that will reveal the next layer of the process. At some point in the chain, it will become clear that our fear about what might happen to them speaks about something we are afraid to lose. When we are afraid for others, it is because we see them as extensions of ourselves. So if, for example, we are afraid our child will fail at something important, it scares us because we take it as our own failure as a parent, a threat to our fulfillment. It becomes easy at that point to see that our fear of their suffering reflects a fear of how we could suffer.
- Remember, one’s core fear is one of the five universal themes of loss mentioned earlier: (1) abandonment, or loss of love; (2) loss of identity; (3) loss of meaning; (4) loss of purpose, or of the chance to express oneself; (5) loss of life, or fear of death, including fear of sickness or pain. Again, don’t become preoccupied with these labels. They are meant to be guidelines for what to look for, but your own wording may better capture the essence of your core fear.
- You’ll recognize the core fear when you can’t go any further with the questions. And you’ll want to keep asking the questions for a bit even after you think you’ve reached the core fear. Only when you come up with the same answer each time can you be sure you’ve arrived. You’ll also recognize the core when you have an “Aha!” moment, understanding that you have found a secret at the root of things. This is often accompanied by powerful memories and flashbacks of how the core fear led to significant moments in your life. You may become aware of the connections between your present circumstances and earlier life experiences, decisions, associations, and learning. You may even remember the origin of your core fear.⁷ All this can sometimes

evoke powerful emotions, but in a most meaningful way.

It's also important to understand that our core fear, when activated, can stimulate one or more of the other core fears, even if on a subtle level. Remember, we all have some of each of the five and they can be closely linked in our mind. For instance, if one is confronted with their core fear of death, they are, of course, going to be afraid of losing meaning, identity, purpose, and love. Death threatens to take all of these away. Less obviously, a core fear of losing love can also trigger other fears: we don't know who we are and can feel all is meaningless and without purpose when we lose love. It can also trigger, at least in the back of our mind, the sociobiological fear of dying . . . if we are cut off from our "tribe," it can be difficult to survive. Because the five core fears are so linked, you may have trouble choosing the one core fear that predominates over the rest. But if you continue asking the three questions until you can't come up with a new answer, it will become clear. As an example, one client I worked with had a core fear of losing his identity. He had always been treated as the "golden boy" so losing this identity meant for him that others wouldn't love him in the same way. He had also built up a chief defense of making sure others saw him as the golden boy and had all sorts of plans for becoming famous and "special." Without that identity, he felt his value (meaning) would be lost, as would his opportunity to fulfill his plans (purpose). In the end, he also saw the connection to a fear of dying, for it was the overprotectiveness of his mother that had built his identity as someone special. Since his core fear started when he was very young, he interpreted being special as necessary for survival. Otherwise, he felt, his mother might no longer adore him and he could lose her protection.

As you become practiced with the technique, it's exciting to see that all problems lead to the same core fear. If you are a clinician, it's equally exciting to discover that if two people start out with precisely the same problem, they may well end up arriving at different core fears. This is because the core fear is shaped in response to the unique circumstances of our childhood. It gets adapted to the many situations we all encounter throughout life, but each of us interprets those situations through our own distinctive lens. Someone, for example, who has a fear of acquiring a medical condition might interpret it to mean they could be abandoned by those who love them at a time of vulnerability. Someone else with the same fear may have this concern about abandonment as well, but it could be embedded in a primary fear of dying. Another person might feel that their very reason for being on the planet is to help others, and if they are laid low by a medical condition, their purpose is sabotaged. And yet someone else may feel their identity would be at stake if the medical condition should interfere with their ability to be who they previously imagined themselves to be.⁸

The more often you perform this exercise, the more powerful an agent of change it can become in your life. As you go through it with a variety of different circumstances, your confidence that there is always and only one core fear underneath all problems will grow. This gives enormous reassurance that you know the problem and can work on a real solution. It cuts through all the confusion and "lostness" we suffer when confronted with a situation that sends us reeling once

again, our usual equilibrium shown to be a thin disguise over a basic insecurity. Seeing the core fear clearly builds mastery so that in any circumstance we can more quickly and thoroughly understand our reaction. It also makes it possible, as we will find with later exercises, to discover more helpful responses.

CASE STUDIES

Let's look at an example. Jake, a forty-two-year-old man, came to see me because he wanted to be "happier." He had significant social anxiety and had also recently been laid off. His social anxiety made him terrified at the prospect of going to job interviews. Because he was afraid of social situations, his life had become very "small," especially since losing his job. He had his own house but his mother lived with him, and he was filling his time going to the mall with her or staying home. This is how he went through the exercise:

Problem: I have to go on a job interview. Question: Why is that upsetting to you? Answer: I

could make a fool of myself. Question: What are you afraid will happen next? Answer: I'll be

rejected. Question: Why is that upsetting to you? Answer: I'll never be able to get a job.

Question: What are you afraid you'll miss or lose? Answer: I'll lose my home and my security.

Question: Why is that upsetting to you? Answer: I'll be out on the street. Question: What are

you afraid will happen next? Answer: I'll be alone without protection. Question: What are you

afraid will happen next? Core fear: It feels like I'll be exposed, alone, unsafe . . . that I'll die.

We had already discussed the fact that when Jake was one year old, his father "kidnapped" his older brother and disappeared with him, leaving Jake and his mother alone. His mother, a very anxious person herself, hovered over Jake and told him throughout his childhood that his father might come and take him away, too. Going through this exercise, he was struck with a deep awareness that he was replaying the fear of that time over and over in his life. The insight into his social anxiety was profound and revelatory: he felt basically unsafe with people, stripped of any security he may have known before he was one year old and constantly afraid that he would be "taken away" in various forms. When he reached the core fear, he spontaneously began making all sorts of associations to scenes from his past. He hadn't thought about most of these in many years, but suddenly, he said, they all "made sense." He remembered looking longingly at his group of cousins, all of whom played together. He felt outcast both because he wasn't

allowed to see them often and because when he did, they would go home afterward to a loving family while he had to go home alone with his mother. He also understood why his relationship with his mother was so strained. Each time she expressed her own anxiety and helplessness, Jake was reminded that she had never really been able to make him feel secure. This would inflame his fear of being left alone all the more. He also realized why he always sought out older male mentors; he was looking for a brother or father figure to restore what he had lost. And he understood why he was so anxious about job interviews: not only was he afraid of possible rejection at the interview, he was even more anxious about getting the job only to have it “taken away.”

This exercise also gave Jake the insight that he was projecting the face of his father onto potential employers. Each job interview would trigger the entire sequence of thoughts listed in his flow chart. Seeing this, he spontaneously laughed and realized how arbitrary the association was. His social anxiety didn't clear up automatically at this point . . . he simply lost his fear of interviewers. But he did understand the core fear and, later, the ways he was defending against it, unwittingly keeping it alive. Throughout the rest of our work (which included the exercises to come in this book), he succeeded in getting a job, joining a tai chi group where he established new friendships, and joining a dating service to find a girlfriend. In his own words, “I've come a long way from where I used to be. My world was so small before and I was afraid all the time. I really don't feel anxious anymore and am looking forward to getting some of my long-term goals like a new car, house, and, hopefully, more friends and a great relationship with a woman.”

Martin was a fifty-three-year-old real estate broker who came to see me because of “itchy palms.” He was an imposing figure who seemed unusually confident and gregarious. But we quickly recognized that his itchy palms were the result of anxiety, expressed in a way that was “acceptable” to him. Here's how he went through the exercise:

Problem: I'm depressed by the economy. Question: Why is that upsetting to you?

Answer: I can't close any real estate deals. Question: Why is that upsetting to you? Answer:

I've had a dream all my life to make lots of money, and now I'm broke. Question: What are you afraid will happen next?

Answer: I won't get the retirement I've worked so hard for.

Question: What are you afraid will happen next?

Answer: I'll have to keep working too hard the rest of my life.

Question: What are you afraid will happen next?

Answer: I'll be old, tired, and depressed. Question: What are you afraid you'll miss or lose?

Answer: The chance to be happy like when I was a kid, with my family.

Question: Why is that upsetting to you?

Core fear: Life will be pointless if I'm just working hard, never reaching my goals, and I'm never happy.

At this point, he seemed mesmerized and had a distant look on his face. When I inquired about this, he said he was remembering a time in childhood when he was ten years old. His father, whom he idolized, came home from work looking severely depressed and deflated. Martin didn't remember what exactly had happened to cause this but said it was something about his father taking abuse from his boss and having no escape from his very unhappy job. It was at this moment, Martin realized, that his core fear took hold. He loved his father and had always wanted to be "just like him." But seeing his father so beaten down by his job, Martin became afraid for him and also for himself. At that moment, he made his vow: He would make a fortune in life, helping his father out of this predicament and ensuring that he himself never got caught in the same trap. In fact, he recalled going out shortly after this episode, knocking on his neighbors' doors and asking if he could paint fresh addresses on their sidewalks for a fee. From that moment on, he poured himself into the "purpose" of making money. He did, in fact, make millions through his real estate transactions. But when the economy turned, he found himself with lots of money on paper that was essentially meaningless. Still he held on to his dream and was wheeling and dealing as fast as he could, trying to negotiate with banks, employers, and clients to win at "the game." When one day he came into session confessing he was in a significant depression (along with his anxiety), I found the right timing and offered, "You must feel like Sisyphus."⁹ With this, he let out a very heavy sigh and said, "I've gotten caught in exactly the same situation as my father"—the one thing he had been defending against his entire life. This, in fact, was the pivotal moment for him to realize he had taken the means (making money) for the end, endlessly postponing his fulfillment for the idea that someday he would "have it all." With this, he made a rather radical change, deciding he would get a "regular job," one that paid enough to meet his needs. This freed up time to pursue more of what was truly fulfilling for him, including asking his girlfriend to marry him. Interestingly, he didn't give up his real estate deals. He simply let go of the anxiety that drove him so hard. And yes, his palms stopped itching as well.

If the instructions are followed, this exercise works every time and very quickly. But don't mistake its speed for superficiality or lack of potency. This process is designed to bring insight at the deepest level. The only time one can hit a roadblock with it is if one's chief defense is at work. This makes sense since the chief defense is designed to protect us from facing fear. So while it is a relatively rare occurrence, it is possible the chief defense will try to sabotage our efforts in subtle ways.

Still there is a ready fix to this problem. If you get stuck while going through the exercise because your chief defense (or a secondary spin-off) is at work, simply perform the exercise on the fear that the defense is protecting you from. For example, one person I worked with kept qualifying her answers to the three questions by saying, "I think it's such and such but I'm not 100 percent sure." When this happened repeatedly, I recognized the signs of a chief defense at work. Despite my reminders that it wasn't crucial to get the wording exactly right, she was still struggling to give a definitive answer to the questions. I then asked, "What are you afraid will happen next if you don't give quite the right answer?" This question released the entire blockade as she instantly saw a defense of perfectionism at work (manifested as a secondary defense of intellectualization, trying to "figure out" the perfect answer). In a matter of thirty seconds, she saw the core fear that had been running her life, what she was afraid she'd miss or lose if she gave up this quest for perfection and precision.

Another client of mine was afraid to start the exercise, imagining that she would discover something frightening she wasn't already aware of. I began by encouraging her with the thought that if she found such a fear, she would have already been carrying it around anyhow and it would be healing to bring it out into the open. Still she was unwilling, so we then started the exercise with the question "If you go through this exercise, what are you afraid will happen next?" This gave her the necessary detachment from her problems to get the ball rolling and ultimately led to the same core fear she would have found regardless of the problem she started with. And another woman I worked with stopped the process when she was almost at the end of it. She had already realized that her upset with her mother and God (as a surrogate for her mother) was causing great distress, and she was ready to see the core fear underneath this defense. She suddenly said, "If I go any further, I'll have to let go of my anger at them." We then worked the process through successfully by asking, "What are you afraid you'll miss or lose if you let go of your anger at them?" She lit up with the insight of a core fear of losing her identity—her anger gave her a distinct identity from a mother who, she realized, had always used her as a "trophy" to show off to her friends.

So if you get stuck during the exercise, you can be sure there is a defense at work and that the defense is hiding a fear about the process. Simply ask, "What am I afraid will happen next if I go

through the rest of the exercise?” or some version of “What am I afraid I’ll miss or lose if I face the fear that I’m defending against?” and you will unlock the process quickly and easily.

PROOF THAT THE CORE FEAR IS UNDER EVERY PROBLEM

We have said there is one core fear under every problem we have, and now you can prove this to yourself. Whatever problem you start with in the exercise, it will always reduce to the same core fear at the end. A seventy-two-year-old woman started sessions with me for trouble urinating. Having already consulted with her physicians, it became quickly apparent this was an anxiety symptom. Going through the Digging for Gold exercise, she saw that her fear of not being able to urinate led to fear of losing her purpose in life—she was afraid she would become confined to her house, never free to do what she wanted. At a later point, she was being harassed by local teenagers for being transgendered. Going through the exercise again, she saw that her anxiety for her safety (which might have been mistaken for a core fear of death) amounted to, again, the fear that she would always be looking over her shoulder, never able to go out of her house freely to live her life. And yet another time, she was afraid of retirement, fearing she would have nothing to do with her time. This began to look like a core fear of losing meaning, feeling empty without a job to go to. But underneath this, she discovered the deeper fear that she would not be able to express her potential once she retired, losing the chance to do what she loved. Three different problems, each interpreted through the same core fear lens.

I recently had a twenty-nine-year-old client with heavy anxiety (including OCD) ask me to demonstrate that every problem led to the same core fear. We had just gone through the Digging for Gold exercise and discovered a core fear of death (lack of security). It was closely tied to a fear of losing love. I already knew something of his background and that it had left him terribly anxious about not having enough “love and security.” I also knew that the one time he had had a girlfriend, the feeling of love gave him a sense of security (and identity, meaning, and purpose) he had never known otherwise. To demonstrate the principle that all problems lead to the same core fear, I invited him to pick something that seemed innocuous or completely unrelated to what he thought his difficulties were about. He chose the problem of not wanting to brush his teeth at night. His first interpretation was that he “just didn’t feel like being bothered sometimes.” We went through the exercise again, this time asking, “Why is the idea of brushing your teeth upsetting to you?” At one level in the chain, he realized he was afraid that he would find a piece of food on his tooth. When asked, “What are you afraid will happen next?” he replied that he might brush his teeth with the piece of food under the brush and damage the enamel. Next he was afraid he would have to go the dentist, that the dentist might give him medication, and the medication would make him “foggy and unclear.” He then had a flashback to the time he had to take antidepressant medication because his girlfriend left him. His association of feeling foggy and unclear from medication left him feeling exposed to the pain (the lack of security) he felt then. When I began the process with him, I had no idea how a

reluctance to brush his teeth would lead to this same core fear.

Once again, it's vitally important that we find our core fear. Doing so, along with finding our chief defense, not only gives insight into the foundation of our personality but explains comprehensively why we suffer. And when we realize that the core fear and chief defense are the basic forces that drive behavior, we are given a profound understanding of the human condition—how we choose our projections, build a consensual reality, and respond to it as if true. Of course, these projections are not, by and large, making us happy. Knowing their source, we have hope for real change in our life and in the world, resolving the fears that gave rise to our problems in the first place.

NOTE TO THE READER:

TO LEARN HOW TO RESOLVE THE CORE FEAR, SEE
CHAPTERS 11-13.

FOOTNOTES

1. I'd like to give some background on the development of this technique. The technique first started taking shape in my late adolescence when I composed a poem about the power of asking "Why?" The poem visually laid out a process of deconstructing experience by asking the question "Why?" in serial fashion. Starting at the top left of the page, it described some existential problem (I no longer recall the details of exactly what the problem was). On the right side of the same line was simply the question "Why?" as in "Why is this so?" The answer to that question was written on the left of the page under neath the first problem, to which the reply was, again, "Why?" on the right. The end of the poem concluded that if one kept going with this process, extrapolating far enough to the original source, one could reveal important truths about the nature of the universe. Several years later, I attended a seminar by David Burns, who briefly mentioned a little exercise he had developed called the Downward Arrow or sometimes the Vertical Arrow. It took a psychological problem and asked the question "If this were true, what is causing me to be upset?" repeating the question again and again, writing the answers below each other with a vertical arrow pointing down between each. I immediately recognized the similarity to my poem and

was excited about its potential. But as it turns out, the two processes had very different purposes. In the Vertical Arrow, the objective is to identify negative thoughts to then apply traditional CBT techniques of disputing these thoughts, seeing them as irrational. I was searching for the ultimate source of a problem, the singular “irrational belief” under all others. The CBT model that Dr. Burns was coming from doesn’t propose such a singular source. Instead, it talks about our many irrational beliefs. In the deconstructing anxiety model, these all spin off from an ultimate “core fear.” With the Vertical Arrow, it is possible that one could reach this ultimate level, but they will usually stop short of it once they find an irrational belief to dispute. Furthermore, if one did happen to reach the ultimate level, they wouldn’t think of it as the cause of all problems, as the reason they bought into irrational beliefs in the first place. They wouldn’t be seeing it as an explanation for the structure of their personality, their first and primary interpretation of life that gave rise to all the rest. As per his stated goal, Dr. Burns’s technique might replace or dispute particular irrational beliefs, handling particular problems, but it doesn’t attempt to get at the root of them all. I was looking for a process that would get at this root so it could be dug up completely, preventing it from generating new forms of the same problem. Nevertheless, I found Dr. Burns’s question “If this were true, what is causing me to be upset?” more helpful than simply asking “Why?” and I tweaked it a bit to apply to my own exercise. I also added two more variations of the question that helped maximize the process. I was my own first subject to undergo the exercise and was excited to find what clearly represented an original, fundamental belief—a true core fear. As I repeated the process with different problems, I found that at the bottom of each was the same core fear, confirming my hypothesis that if we deconstruct any problem all the way, extrapolating back to the beginning, we will find the ultimate source of our entire worldview. In working with clients over the years, I discovered it was true for them as well, eventually discerning the five general categories of core fears described earlier.

2. This claim is made based on my work with clients and seminar participants over the past thirty-three years. A research project is also underway.

3. Some may wonder if facing one’s fear in this and the exercises to come can feel threatening or anxiety-producing, and it is a valid question. The wisdom of taking someone at their level of readiness is all-important; we don’t want to add fear to fear. However, in many years of working with these exercises and performing them with thousands of people, I’ve rarely found someone too anxious to go through with them. (In fact, in each case where I did, their anxiety was too great to actually start the exercises. The solution, as will be discussed later, was to help them discharge the physical energy of the anxiety with a Gestalt-type abreaction. One might also begin with a relaxation exercise to help create enough calm to begin.) Virtually everyone seems to find the exercises relatively comfortable, with little or no undue stress. I believe this is for two reasons. First, when someone buys into the exercises, they become excited about the possibility of insight and healing. This is an important antidote to any discomfort that may arise from facing fear. Second, all of these exercises give one a sense of control, as you will see, along with an intellectual reason for examining one’s fear. This creates a safe “distance” from the fear, evoking an objective, “observer’s” perspective.

4. A helpful alternative to “What are you afraid will happen next?” is often “What are you afraid that will lead to?”

5. This exercise is designed to give insight into, more than provide release from, the core fear. Other exercises to come will work specifically on its release. Still, a deep insight, if one sees the true root of things, can effect this release, as we walk fully through the Doorway of the Mind.

6. As an example, I had a client who was afraid to tell his boss he wouldn't take on extra work for fear he might get fired. Going through the exercise, he realized that if he got fired, he was afraid he wouldn't be able to pay his bills. I assumed that this would lead to a core fear of being out on the street and dying, as it would for many people. When I suggested something to the effect, I saw that my interpretation didn't exactly light him up with understanding. I then followed the exercise without interfering, asking what he was afraid would happen next if he couldn't pay his bills. His answer was that he would lose others' respect. This eventually led to a core fear of losing his identity as someone who always took care of his responsibilities. Growing up, he was shamed by his father for not being responsible, and this became his preoccupation.

7. But again, it's not necessary to be able to trace back to the origin of the core fear. Doing so can be helpful in gaining insight. But because any problem leads to the same root, we can access the core fear just as readily by seeing how it informs a present problem. Still the further back we can go in our history the better because defenses accumulate over time. Therefore, exploring an early incident of the core fear can make it easier to see it in its more pure (less defended) form.

8. This is why it's so important that the clinician not impose his or her interpretation of what a client's answer will be in advance of letting them discover it on their own.

9. Sisyphus was a tragic figure in Greek mythology, destined for eternity by the gods to push a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down each time.