

The Fear Cave, the Border Ground and the Hope Land

by D. E. Percy

Whatever you have already done in life, however far you've travelled and whatever your achievements, regrets, goals, and losses, now is the starting point for the rest of your life. Having hope means having direction and aspiration for something, whether it's big or small, and wholehearted hope takes us beyond both fears and borders.

How do we hope when brokenhearted? Or deeply sceptical? Or when we've reached the limit of endurance, or are filled with fear? These are not easy questions yet are universal life experiences.

War, climate change, Covid and our inevitable physical ageing, all set the scene for a background landscape of potential fears and limits that can weaken the capacity for hope. Or does it?

Buddhist philosophy and many existential psychologies teach that *whatever dominates our thoughts, becomes our reality*. It becomes our existence.

This can work in ways positive and negative. For instance, to help train the mind into the positive attitude, Buddhists learn teachings like the 8-fold Noble Path; American Indians follow the sacred Way of the Warrior, etc. One of my favourite positive attitude examples was in India at the height of Covid—Prime Minister Modi didn't say you're going into isolation or lock-down. What he said was, "From today, we're declaring *21 National Days of Staying at Home*." And just like that, a country of 1.3 billion people closed down.

Negative attitudes and thoughts stem from emotions like fear, anger, envy, and resentment. The way I see it, sometimes our thoughts are so loud, our emotions so strong we don't hear the inner voice, which doesn't come from the ego, being rational or emotional, nor simply from intuition or instinct; because inner voice comes from the whole Self, and according to the esteemed psychologist Carl Jung, the whole Self has total integrity and includes the ego and all the aspects mentioned. Sometimes we hear the inner voice but deny it, cancel it out, or don't trust it, and in the rush for some resolution, we miss our own wisdom.

The Fear Cave, the Border Grounds, and the Hope land

The whole Self includes all our conscious and unconscious aspects, and our ego, intelligence, emotions, and psyche are some of these aspects. At the centre of the whole Self is the Soul. The poet Rumi said,

“When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy.”

The Fear Cave

The Fear Cave and the Hope Land were the subject of a talk I delivered online during the first months of lockdown and the metaphors seemed to capture the experiences people were living. It doesn't take lockdown to know the contrast between these two internal states, fear and hope, as part of life. Fear is primal, the fight for life and survival. Being gripped with fear can feel like being closed in, trapped, or imprisoned, like being forced into a dark place without knowing if we will come out of it.

Yet fear is intelligent. It has a strong warning message when we hear and act on it.

Fear is intelligent when it impels us to move away from real and immediate danger.

But prolonged, ongoing fear closes us down; our bodies are not designed to stay in a constant state of fight, flight, or freeze. Then thoughts fester and become negative, for instance blaming and shaming of others or ourselves, or becoming desperate to survive a situation that may be grim or disturbing but is not life threatening. Sometimes we hide out in the fear cave for too long without realising it and fail to see that fear has come to dominate our thoughts.

Looking back at your fear, what was your inner voice urging you to do?

Was there a pattern to those times of fear?

The Border Ground

This is about limits. Limits are a border, a boundary (limits from the Latin, *limes*, meaning border.) We tend to think about our limits as restrictions and constraints that are imposed as well as flaws and shortcomings of our own, and that's what limits can be—but not always so. There is a positive side to limits that I hope is indicated in the notion of the border.

Firstly, it takes courage to confront your limitations, especially when facing declining capabilities and accept that's the way it is for now. Then to go on anyway with your own process of growth allowing it to bring you joy and knowing that perfection is a non-stop ferris wheel.

Sometimes limits are self-imposed, and sometimes they are imposed by forces beyond us, which doesn't automatically mean the limit cannot serve us even though initially we may think so. The third possibility is we unconsciously engineer a boundary and limitation onto ourselves, and in that case we should not underestimate the wisdom of our own unconscious, e.g. accidentally missing a project appointment when we hadn't come to terms with wishing to escape the project itself.

Borders define and delineate; they can be used to separate, compare, enhance, differentiate, or confirm identity. Borders also impose limits like prison walls or blocks to growth. Skin is the physical border between you and the world. Borders contain. This is both a blessing and a curse. I need to know when to challenge borders and when to define and contrast borders to focus growth.

Borders can be an aid to growth. We can become more attentive to setting personal limits with discernment and awareness, including our personal tendencies to be over-bounded (with rigid limits) or under-bounded (with marshmallow limits or lacking in limits altogether).

Knowing limits, my capacities physical, mental & psychological as well as my values which touch on my soul, can save heartache and confusion, and provide clarity on what matters for my remaining life which becomes more important with age. This is not the same as being fenced in. Borders often change as we age and grow—for instance, physical limitations or aspirations may change, or we go beyond a limit to learn or do something new. Borders are not necessarily fixed or literal and can be the opposite to being fenced in or left wanting. Identity is expanded and depleted by the way we use and think of borders.

Beyond borders,
beyond the boundaries of being,
is the night sky, a universe without borders.
Here on earth, the horizon is a border,
it's the meeting place
where the ocean blurs into the heavens,
the time when night becomes day.
—From *The Power of Place*, D. E. Percy, 2009

Are you hemmed in by self-imposed borders?

Do you attribute limits to others?

The Hope Land

Aesop's Fables warns us, "Be careful of what you wish for". There's a distinction between wishing and hoping that may be useful to consider without getting caught up in semantics.

Hope empowers. Hope is a sub-set of love, an aspiration, a longing, a positive desire or aim with a feeling of expectation or optimism. But it's not the same as optimism, because hope can exist alongside pessimism and doubt. Just look at the Ukraine. We can be hopeful but not optimistic, the two are not incompatible just like hope and unhappiness or hope and suffering can co-exist.

Wishing shares some of those traits too and can be powerful.

The difference as I see it is wishing can be baseless optimism, a feel-good avoidance of the doubts or difficulties and is often passive, just wishing but doing nothing. Wishing can be active, for example a heartfelt wish for others expressed with loving intent, as I was rightly reminded recently, like sincerely wishing a fellow peace and happiness as though it's a blessing. The main thing is for hope or wishing to take you beyond fears and limits.

Hope isn't passive, it needs action and what environmental activist, Joanna Macy, calls "Active Hope" and that is the quality we see in the great leaders, writers, philosophers, and friends who inspire us. Hope is something you aspire to and do, not something to have.

It follows then that hope is not a matter of sitting around waiting for it to come to you. We've probably all done it, I know I have, waited to have an inspiration or some help or a rescue—but to me that's a form of passive wishful thinking. Hope springs from a longing, a calling, a need or want for something better, and then it's sustained by getting up and doing something.

Hope is a practice, it is what you do, and like courage, hope rises and builds up with action. I like to think of hope as opening our eyes to seeing beauty, the beauty of life in nature and people, and we can act on their behalf. We can act when they aren't able to; we can do our share. And knowing our limits, we can be ready to act with our strengths.

We become hopeful through our actions and embodying hope. Whether the action is big or small, when it is wholehearted it carries the meaning of hope. When my husband knew he was close to dying, as soon as he stirred every morning I'd ask, "How are you, sweetheart?" And he always replied, "Ready for today," and that was the best and most courageous expression of hope he could make at that time and it's simple intensity will stay with me.

Hope takes courage. It comes from the heart like a sacred resolution and builds on itself. When we open our soul, we help cultivate love and hope in the world. What would it be like to bring active hope fully into your life?

In Conclusion

Whatever dominates our thoughts, becomes our reality. It becomes our existence.

Reading between the lines of that teaching, the implication is we have choice, no matter the situation. Choice comes from attitude and the awareness that we do have a choice. But I'd like to take it further than that: each of the three background mind states mentioned here—the fear cave, border grounds and hope land—contain a positive message and psychological state—

Fear is intelligent: when we can hear its message and heed its warning.

Limits are borders: sometimes limits will restrict us, but they also contain, protect, define, focus, can even inspire and sometimes need some change.

Hope is active: it dies away without action, it flourishes and expands with action, large or small, as long as it is wholehearted action. Hope empowers the future. But sometimes, the hope for something is lost forever and it's not a matter of regaining hope but grieving for its loss.

Each state of fear, limits, and hope has something potent in common—it's a vehicle for the inner voice. If you can pause long enough and listen for your inner voice in those states, the inner voice gives a warning or wisdom, sometimes in a whisper, sometimes in a feeling or image that niggles at the back of the mind or rises up in a dream to get your attention. Whether warning or wisdom, the inner voice urges us to hear our calling now, whether big or small. Then you might want to think about what the poet Rumi said:

“Respond to every call that excites your spirit.”

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