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## Introduction to Defining 'Fear': A Spectrum Approach

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# An Introduction to Defining 'Fear': A Spectrum Approach



R. Michael Fisher, Ph.D.  
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**Technical Paper No. 1**

In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute

An Introduction to Defining 'Fear':  
A Spectrum Approach

R. Michael Fisher, Ph.D.

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The In Search of Fearlessness Institute is dedicated to research and publishing on fear, fearlessness and emotions in general, as well as critical reviews of such works. Preference is given to works with an integral theoretical perspective.

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# An Introduction to Defining 'Fear': A Spectrum Approach

- R. Michael Fisher, Ph.D.  
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*Technical Paper No. 1*

## **Preface to the 2nd Edition**

The world's fear problem has not improved much since I first penned this Technical Paper No. 1 as the kick off to a series that is still running today. It is now nearly 18 years later, and things seem worse; yet my work in *fearology* persists. And more importantly, I'm optimistic that a new scholarship on fear<sup>1</sup> has emerged as well, even if it came about because of 9/11, 2001.

In re-reading this paper I have remembered more than a few important points that over the years have faded from my memory. Like, the fact, that it was a religious studies professor, John Wren Lewis, University of Sidney, who wrote me in 1995 asking if I had a "precise definition" of fear that I had come up with, which was unique, and if I did, he would use it in his book. Of course, that got me thinking and this paper emerged to answer Dr. Lewis. One particular sentence near the end of this paper stood out: "If I took the time to write them out, I'm sure I would have two or three hundred definitions of 'fear' already and this research has only begun."

I've now written numerous publications on the topic, which can be found on my various websites.<sup>2</sup> In 1995, I had no idea that fearology would be my chosen career focus but I did know that the study of fear and fearlessness was extremely important to the future of humanity and indeed became my passionate life purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> There have been a number of academic journals that began to feature entire issues dedicated to fear. A quick glance and validation of a new scholarship on fear (and a new vocabulary that is arising with it), I recommend the significant (yet incomplete) overview by Brissett (2003).

<sup>2</sup> The author is co-founder and director of In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute (and co-founder of the In Search of Fearlessness Project, <http://www.feareducation.com>). He is founder and former director of the Center for Spiritual Inquiry & Integral Education (<http://csiie.org>) and Director there of the Department of Integral & 'Fear' Studies, and a consultant with his own business firm (<http://loveandfearsolutions.com>).

Although I had written many unpublished pieces before 1995,<sup>3</sup> trying to make sense of all the different writings (discourses) of fear and on 'fear' across the disciplines and in popular culture, Technical Paper No. 1 is my *first* official publication on this topic. It is because of this status as a classic in my repertoire that the re-typing of it in complete original form into a digital format is worth the effort. In 2003, I put extracts of this paper online on my website archive but no attempt was made to add any changes or write a Preface. This 2nd edition of the paper is kept accurate to the original with a few minor changes: copy editing, bracket inserts to add a comment or enrichment and footnotes to guide further explorations. Note: to distinguish the original ms. footnotes I'll insert [original]. This ought to help make it more contemporary with my thought today. On that note, the basic content is still sound and reflects my general orientation to 'Fear' Studies today.

I cannot overemphasize that any postmodern and/or holistic-integral study of *fear* and/or '*fear*' will have to deal with the problem of defining and making meaning of the topic and phenomena in question. Finding a universal common language in 'Fear' Studies would be ideal, yet, I have argued in Technical Paper No. 1, and this remains my view now, that there is never going to be *one and only one* definition of fear we'll all agree on, and everyone will still continue to make their own diverse meanings of fear and/or 'fear' no matter what universals (orienting generalizations) and theories can be agreed upon to guide the inquiries. The world is highly globalized and so should be the definition and meaning of fear and 'fear'. Technical Paper No. 1 anticipated that need for diversity, yet with some integration and synthesis potential.

How to do that sorting and classifying of concepts, terms and methodologies is where things get really complex, if not tedious and technical. Conflicts will exist and some polarities grow rather than dissolve (e.g., the problem of what I've called *fear-positivism* in the last several decades and especially the last two<sup>4</sup>). This is all healthy for the field of 'Fear' Studies and fearology, as long as the various 'camps' don't form their isolating groups and claim superiority while they breast-feed off their chosen political ideologies (and narrow-mindedness), and/or try to convince themselves they don't have such dis-eases nor value-based ideologies (which is even

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<sup>3</sup> The very first pamphlet-booklets, under 8pp, on fear and related topics, were produced in 1990, when I was freshly embedded in the co-founding of In Search of Fearlessness Project, with assistance some times from my partner at the time and co-founder, Catherine Sannuto.

<sup>4</sup> See a problematizing of this in Fisher (2010, pp. 100-02). Note, as much as I hold this critique of fear-positivism so prevalent today when people write and teach about fear and its management, I am slowly working through a revision of my 2010 critique as I have begun a new theorizing on what is being called an "ecology of fear" (grounded in the evolutionary biological and ecological sciences); this latter move has had me shifting even my own staunch position on the problem of: *is fear natural?* and, what do we mean when we say *fear is normal* (i.e., beneficial). It's an interesting problem, yet resolved in my mind.

worse). My point is, there is, arguably, in a postmodern and/or integral view, a value-free position to take on the definition of fear. Technical Paper No. 1 is my first systematic published piece that asserts that argument, even if it is (was) a bit naive in 1995.

There is *no one way* to do fearology. My way is an *integral* (*a la* Ken Wilber and others) way. It is a "spectrum approach" as this paper points out. And near 18 years later, I've not found a better approach that is as inclusive, rich in potential, and powerful. Of course, still, after all these years, there is much to be proven as to how powerful this approach is. I often think that the society cannot take it in (absorb) and digest this complex postmodern theory. Some days, in frustration at the alone path this is, I call myself a "theoretical fearologist" analogous to a theoretical mathematician, physicist, or biologist. Very few people can understand their work and even less see any way to apply it (often, that includes the theoretician themselves). However, if Einstein's theoretical physics proved useful eventually, then that keeps me going. I am well prepared to not see the fruits of fearology in my life-time.

I realized this all from the start, when in 1989 my visionary calling came to me and the study of the topic began systematically. In that sense, Technical Paper No. 1 is a crucial document, and is relatively easy for the new reader of my works to grasp (I think). I wrote it well before I attended graduate school. Re-reading the document for this 2nd edition—which I admit is refreshing because I don't generally read so closely what I wrote after I publish it—Technical Paper No. 1 in many ways cuts through a lot of the layers of complexity and information that has been gathered since, and that cutting through is a 'working through' that touches more intimately the impulse and qualities of my soul and this entire research project. It seems the older one gets, sometimes we stray from the 'purity' of where we started from and readers won't get that sense of the first impulse and thoughts in later matured works by an author.

One has to turn an eye at the whole issue of my vocabulary in fearology, it is unwieldy sometimes, even for me, yet, the foundation of Technical Paper No. 1 is that we are in a time on this earth and its evolution of consciousness where merely accepting everything we believe about "fear" as taught to us, is good enough. The creating of 'fear' (with single apostrophe marks) is not totally original in the world of postmodern analysis and deconstruction methodology. Yet, I seem to be the first person to do this systematically re: *fear* and even *fearlessness*, although, there are a few other rare researchers on *fear* who have used this signification as well,<sup>5</sup> albeit, not totally the same as I use it (which Technical Paper No.1 will explain).

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<sup>5</sup> I'm thinking of Shirlow & Pain (2003, p. 17) where they mark 'fear' at one point, although not later, as "constructed in particular ways around certain groups, and widely used to serve

Point is, integral fearology is a critical praxis, and theory that demands we challenge the pre-givens and meanings already offered, and ask tough questions, un-pack those pre-givens, and see if we can re-construct "better" definitions, meanings, and conceptual frameworks and theories (if not philosophies) for understanding fear and its role in human affairs (not to exclude all sentient beings that are impacted by human fear management). It is not going to be easy to unplug ourselves from the 'Fear' Matrix (all due respect goes to The Wachowskis' sci-fi film trilogy beginning with *The Matrix* in 1999).

I've often wondered where are all the copies of this first version of Technical Paper No. 1 are today. I probably printed 60 or so over the years of the mid-1990s and some people bought them for the cost of \$4, but mostly I gave them away. I must admit no one ever talked to me about this paper, except one new agey lady saw it on the table at a talk I gave and shrugged her shoulders and walked away muttering "It's way too tiny of print, it can't be worth a thing."

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**Abstract** [original] : Defining 'fear' (is, or) could be one of the most important research agendas of the human sciences in the next century, because of its key role in oppression and liberation. This introductory paper is the beginning of a systematic search for one or more definitions of 'fear' that will be useful in a more complete understanding of the 'fear' phenomenon. Preliminary evidence indicates that there is no one definition that adequately defines the human experience of 'fear' at the individual and collective level. The traditional definition of 'fear' [i.e., *fear*] as merely an "emotion or feeling" is inadequate to a holistic understanding of the 'fear' phenomenon and has for too long kept 'fear' in the realm of private life and concerns.<sup>6</sup>

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certain political interests." That is key to my work as well. For reference enrichment re: my latest publications and/or documents on expanding and defining my fear and 'fear' vocabulary beyond the stage of Technical Paper No. 1 are as follows: Fisher (1998, 2005, 2011, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> This insight is striking in 1995, before the plethora of critiques began in academic circles, across disciplines, that were challenging the vicious neo-liberalism (ideology) and its "politics of fear." that was beginning to dominate higher education, as it had trickled down from the American business/corporate-governmental arenas prior. After 9/11, 2001, neo-liberalism bloomed because it was able to find a foot-hold in politics and business domains as most people in North America (especially the USA) were in 'shock and awe' (i.e., terror). A major neo-liberalism characteristic is "privatization" of everything, including our interior experiences, affects, the body, etc. Thus, it is a great problem when we allow "fear" to be defined and/or conceptualized in that private, individualist, and psychological way only. Often, later, I called this the "psychologism" of fear studies—even though, I wasn't the first critic to see this bias. Fear ('fear') has too much political weight and stickiness attached to it to ever remove it from the public, social, cultural, communal sphere. The politics of fear (and culture of fear) are common topics in my later writings during and after going to graduate school in 1998-2003.

With an increasing amount of violence/hurting on the planet, a more psycho-social and political definition is sought. It turns out that a *spectrum approach* that utilizes the best information from the various disciplines from biophysiology to theology will produce new insights into the conceptualization of 'fear.' This new spectrum approach to understanding 'fear' will ultimately lead to a new spectrum approach to the treatment [i.e., management/education] of 'fear' and our liberation from it. This paper explores the importance of becoming aware of the motivation and context in which 'fear' is to be defined [and "used"]. Any 'fear'-based motivation to define 'fear' [and *fear*] will produce incomplete results at best and complete distortion [if not pathologies] at worst. The literature is replete with hundreds of definitions of 'fear' with many different descriptions and some totally contradictory views. The author prefers to speak of the 'fear' patterns of energy, feelings, [emotions], beliefs, values and thinking that are symptomatic of hurting [i.e., suffering] human beings.

Note: 'fear' is written with a small letter with (') marks to indicate the term is under [deconstruction and] re-construction and metaphysically *a posteriori* to the concept of 'Love' (with a capital) which is the Ground of Being (Fisher, 1995a).<sup>7</sup>

### **An Introduction to Defining 'fear': A Spectrum Approach**

Robert M. Fisher

*Defining 'fear' is like trying to define 'Love,' except the former is likely to be a thousand times more useful to human liberation.*

#### Precise Definition or Process of Defining?

Do you want a definition of 'fear',<sup>8</sup> or do you want to explore defining 'fear'? If you want a precise definition of 'fear' [and *fear*]<sup>9</sup> you may want to do

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this is an ontological position I had taken at the time, based on a lot of reading and experience. It was a reasonable and ethical working hypothesis. This has since been slightly altered in my work, and/or at times turned upside-down (see my "ecology of fear" writings). For a good overview recently of the Love vs. Fear metaphysical proposition that is quite universal (more or less) in a lot of wisdom traditions etc., see Fisher (2012a).

<sup>8</sup> [original] In conceptualizing and defining 'fear,' based on the research I have collected, there are two conventions used in the text: (1) 'fear' is written with a small letter because it is metaphysically *a posteriori* an ontological derivative of 'Love' (written with a capital letter) [note: Love has (') marks because if 'fear' needs them so does 'Love' because each is going under a Love-fear relationship deconstruction and reconstruction or *therapia* as Wilber might call it]. Basically, the universe or Kosmos (*a la* Ken Wilber) is "Benign" and "Love-based"—and 'fear' is a formative pattern created when a human is hurt and doesn't heal that hurt—thereby, having to dissociate from the 'Love' [i.e., today I would use Wilber's terms for this metaphysical concept of Love as two patterns or dynamics he calls *Eros-Thanatos*] that is the Ground of Being of all Creation. The metaphysics (origin story) of 'fear' has been written in publications by this author in progress called: *Growing Up Isn't Straightforward* and *What Happened to 'Love', Where Cometh 'fear'?* [both still remain as penned in the early-90s ms. form as unfinished] Specifically, see the Uni-Bicentric Theorem I've created as the foundation of this radical metaphysics of these two formative patterns of values and, (2) both 'fear' and 'Love' are written with (') marks to indicate when I am referring to the largest metaphysical (and transpersonal) sense of these words in the human sub-



something with the precise definition, much as a scientist wants to control and manipulate variables in a research experiment.

Biophysiological, experimental and behavioral psychologists [strict positivist empiricists] have long been defining and treating 'fear' [and *fear*] as if it was a precise "lump" (or innate reflex) but this has now been strongly challenged and primarily discarded by most cognitive and psychoanalytic psychologists.<sup>10</sup>

The philosophical and spiritual/mystic traditions have long ago abandoned such a simplified view of 'fear' [i.e., *fear*] as quantitative and merely biophysiological, although some recent trends in neurophilosophy are returning [in part] to such a materialistic [foundational] view of 'fear' [i.e., *fear*] and emotions.

### More Than A Feeling

Our dictionaries [at least in English language] and sophisticated medical and psychological encyclopedias generally remain tainted with the rigid [reductionistic] and outdated definition of 'fear' [i.e., *fear*] as a "*feeling or emotion*," as if that is what 'fear' is as a total phenomenon in the human experience. However, if 'fear' [and *fear*] is to be revised in the future, surely the growing evidence indicates that it is not a "feeling lump" or an "emotion

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jective [and objective] experience. These marks also indicate the words/concepts/definitions are under deconstruction and reconstruction for the purpose of re-newing their meanings and applications beyond the 'norm' or traditional consciousness view [i.e., the norm consciousness of a particular time and/or culture that hegemonically constructs their meaning and definition]. I often call this new view [perspective on the study of Love and fear] a fearlessness context, which is what could also be called a transpersonal [and/or spiritual] view.

<sup>9</sup> This adding of *fear* in brackets is something I would do almost all the way through this publication, and I am doing this because of my clarity on this today. In 1995, I was tending to almost always use 'fear' when the discussion was in my realm of concern, but the fact is, most people wouldn't use 'fear' and thus, we ought to be cognizant of using the language they understand. There may be times in this ms. when such correction is not added because the reference in the text is confined to 'fear' (and that is appropriate, even in my work today).

<sup>10</sup> S. J. Rachman (1990) [a highly regarded experimental psychologist at the time] in *Fear and Courage*, has provided an extensive review of the changing conceptualization of 'fear' [i.e., *fear*] in the research fields of physiological psychology, behavioral psychology and the more predominant cognitive field today. Although he gives some information about psychoanalytical conceptualizations of 'fear' [i.e., *fear*], he doesn't cover this latter topic well and doesn't mention the humanistic, existential or transpersonal views of 'fear' [i.e., *fear*] further along the [Wilberian] spectrum of approaches and ways of knowing. [This is still a major and recalcitrant problem in the field of fear studies today; in later years I found a similar but even more cogent critique re: confusions and contradictions in the psychological literature on defining and conceptualizing *fear*, to Rachman's, in the eminent writing of the psychologist Jerome Kagan (1998).

lump" [*via* Rachman's criticism] that can be researched and defined in materialistic and quantitative terms alone, as just another feeling and emotion [like all the others]. No more reducible is 'fear' than is 'Love,' to merely a value-neutral and relative [individualistic] feeling, emotion or some neuro-physiological reflex. The wisdom and spiritual literature from around the world, through time, has confirmed the notion that 'fear' [and *fear*] is a unique phenomenon in the human experience that far transcends its common reduced definition today.

### An Expanding Context

This essential expansion of the conceptualization of 'fear' [and *fear*] beyond the conventional and popular understanding is an essential part of my own research, writing and teaching. Both 'Love' and 'fear' are seen from a "new" perspective as I will discuss later. They are formative patterns of energy and qualities of experience, patterns of values and beliefs, value centers, motivational principles, worldviews, life-orientations and ways of being<sup>11</sup>—it depends on who you read.

'Love' is the pattern of 'Life' and health, self-regulation in systems, and wellness or liberation. 'fear' is the pattern of toxicity, distress, hurt, non-self-regulation in systems, or what some call the dis-ease and oppression of the cycle of violence.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever the complex "story" and definition is of these two patterns, defining 'fear' requires a 'big picture' context and understanding<sup>13</sup> to truly get a holistic view of the 'fear' phenomenon. This article will begin to delineate this holistic (transpersonal) view utilizing a spectrum approach (*a la* Ken Wilber's "*spectrum of consciousness*" model).

### Challenging the Motivation to Define and Know 'fear'

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, I support this to this day, and one of the aesthetic/artistic means of showing what these (Love and fear) look like in this largest of conceptualizing is something I have put into the A-D/ness Values Survey, which you can find on any of my websites.

<sup>12</sup> I am currently drawing from psychological literature (e.g., Pyszczynski et al., 2011) on what is being called "dual motivate depth psychology" and I believe Love and fear ('Love' and 'fear') can nicely fit that literature and theorizing. You'll note that in 1995 'fear' was all things bad, and 'Love' all things good—I think that is somewhat naive and not as nuanced as my work today; nonetheless, there is an ethical basis to what I am working out in this early piece that makes this work relevant to today.

<sup>13</sup> Wilber identifies these two grand patterns of the Kosmos as: Love = *Eros-Agape* and Fear = *Phobos-Thanatos*. That's my reading of his work, and when you are at this ontological 'big picture' view of evolutionary forces/patterns or meta-motivations as I like to call them, one can see that any reductionistic definition of fear is certainly not nearly adequate to embrace *Phobos-Thanatos* (Wilber, 1995), and that's why in 1995 (and to a large degree today) I use 'fear' to include *Phobos-Thanatos*.

So what precisely does one want to do with 'fear'? The predominant [reductionistic] scientific [via philosophical positivism, empiricism, objectivism] approach to understanding human experience is questionable as to its value to humans to understand the whole complexity and interiority of themselves. The great humanistic-transpersonal psychologist, Maslow (1966) was one of the first psychologists to question the enterprise of science and its role [and motivations] in human affairs. His own analysis of science [as method] was that it was predominantly 'fear'-based itself as a discipline of knowing.<sup>14</sup>

If you want to explore defining 'fear' phenomenologically,<sup>15</sup> as I have chosen to pursue, then 'fear' is left free of any scientific and colonizing imposition or what Maslow (1966) called "neurotic deficiency motivation," to attain precision. Truth of accuracy of understanding may have nothing to do with understanding 'fear,' especially when we attempt to define and study it as if it was an "object: or an "it" outside, or alien to ourselves. I am interested in applying science, philosophy, art and spirituality as ways of knowing and understanding 'fear.' I like Maslow, believed,

... research can come from growth motivation [as opposed to deficiency motivation]. It can be based on anxiety-free interest, and oriented towards personal fulfilment and fullest humaness. It is free to turn outward an intrinsically interesting reality. It is absorbed with the real world rather than with the researcher's own neuroses ['fear']. (Reason & Rowan, 1981, p. 85)

"Anxiety-free interest" is exactly the approach toward studying 'fear' [and *fear*] that is so essential to expanding what can be known about 'fear' [and *fear*]. I call this a *fearlessness context*.

### Precision & Accuracy

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<sup>14</sup> [original] Abraham Maslow (1966) in *The Psychology of Science*, cited and paraphrased in Reason & Rowan (1981, p. 85), summarizes his critique: "Most research and most knowledge, he [Maslow] says, comes from deficiency motivation. That is, it is based on fear, and is carried out to allay anxiety; it is basically defensive. Maslow enumerates 21 cognitive pathologies which emanate from this basic stance."

<sup>15</sup> [original] My own phenomenological inquiry, although it has many of the characteristics of traditional hermeneutics (science of interpretation) and phenomenology, is decidedly unique from postmodern inquiry in that I am very interested in establishing strong universal value (ethical) distinctions that guide us to "better," without having to be oppressive moralistic or pathologically hierarchical and exclusivistic. [I was also doing a critical discourse analysis as my way of knowing, but it wasn't refined; the latter, became important in my graduate work and since following Foucault].

An archery teacher in high school assisted me with this distinction between *precision* and *accuracy*. When I shot six arrows in a cluster together, he told me I had good precision in my method. When I had one arrow [of the six] hit the bulls-eye of the target, he told me I was accurate on only one arrow. My goal, ideally, like that of a researcher, is to be precise and accurate. I never got that far in archery.

### The Spectrum Approach to Understanding

"Empowerment," writes archetypal psychologist James Hillman (1995), comes from understanding the widest spectrum of possibilities for embracing power.

For the past few years I have arrived at a useful context for understanding and organizing the research data on 'fear' [and *fear*]. The context is one of a *spectrum* approach. Although this paper is not aimed at elucidating the details of the spectrum model of 'fear' [and *fear*] in its entirety, it is important to mention it briefly in this introduction. A *fearlessness context* for a researcher means to not leave anything out, denied, or ignored due to 'fear' patterns. The spectrum approach fits the fearlessness criteria in that it is an all-expanding view of how 'fear' [and *fear*] may be conceptualized, defined and understood.

'Fear' [and *fear*] has been conceptualized and defined from many perspectives since the beginning of recorded history. Various languages, metaphors, images and descriptors have been assigned to classify, organize and understand 'fear' [and *fear*]. The spectrum of 'fear' model takes into account that 'fear' [and *fear*] has been expressed, described and defined throughout history by aboriginal peoples in art and myth; by people of classical times in philosophy and religion; in industrial civilization in the sciences, and in psychology particularly.

All expression is about 'quality' of experience or sets of qualities. Ultimately, my research ambition is to establish a paradigm much like Robert Pirsig's (1975, 1992) notion of a "metaphysics of Quality" [as a basis for ethics and morality] in order to deeply and aesthetically understand 'fear' [and *fear*] and its interrelationship to the human experience.

'Fear' [and *fear*] hasn't always been called "fear." Several authors<sup>16</sup> from a variety of backgrounds have claimed that 'fear' [and *fear*] exists and oper-

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<sup>16</sup> [original] Assagioli (1991) wrote, "Fear is like Proteus—assuming a thousand different forms" (p. 169). Masters (1990) wrote, "Fear and all its subspecies" (p. 381). Bend & Wiger (1988) wrote, "Well this fear is quite a thing! It comes in a lot of disguises" (p. 115). Peale (1957) wrote, "fear is a conglomeration of sinister shadows" (p. 77). Ragland (1988) wrote,

ates under different names,<sup>17</sup> faces, disguises, often in the shadows of the unconscious, with a thousand masks (e.g., Assagioli, 1991; Bend & Wiger, 1988; Kopp, 1988; Masters, 1990; Peale, 1957; Ragland, 1988).

Without a spectrum approach to defining 'fear' [and *fear*] many forms of 'fear' [and *fear*] are likely to be missed and misunderstood. Within psychology alone there are several schools and branches, each with their own unique conceptualization and definition of 'fear' [and *fear*]. There certainly is no one definition of 'fear' [or *fear*] that is agreed upon but often 'fear' [and *fear*] is spoken of *as if* everyone knows what is being spoken of. It is this loose tacit assumption that 'fear' [and *fear*] is well understood and universally agreed upon, that I have chosen to challenge and dedicate my research to.

### Development of 'fear': Ontology<sup>18</sup>

With a spectrum approach to 'fear' [and *fear*] there appears to be a developmental logic to the conceptualizations and definitions that reflect the development of an individual's consciousness, and humanity's evolution of consciousness. This is a theme Ken Wilber (1977/82) has elaborated in his *spectrum of consciousness* model in regards to the change perceptions of reality and self-identity. The conceptualization of 'fear' [and *fear*] has as much to do with development and evolution (ontology) as it does with the human experience in a "dominator culture"<sup>19</sup> or oppressive (violent/hurtful) "fear culture."<sup>20</sup> Thus, 'fear' [and *fear*] is an ontological phenomenon similar to what existentialists like Rollo May (1986) have argued about the concep-

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"Throughout my whole life I have had to run and dodge life's snares and people's glares and many other faces of fear" (p. 145). [Many years later a friend and colleague brought me a wonderful book (one of the best for the public) by adult educator, Bonaro Overstreet (1951/71), where she wrote, "We are still far from knowing enough about ourselves to be wholly wise about our fears" (p. 22), and a big reason, she concludes: "... is the simple fact that we often fail to recognize fear for what it is. No other emotion wears so many disguises—convincing disguises that make us, time and again, treat it as something other than itself" (p. 11). This is a major part of the human Fear Problem, as I call it.]

<sup>17</sup> [original] Recently, I made a study of S. J. Rachman and Ken Wilber's writings and found over 160 'fear'-*substitutes* (subspecies) that are used instead of the word 'fear' [i.e., *fear*] yet 'fear' [*fear*] as a phenomenon is being addressed. See Fisher (1995a).

<sup>18</sup> In philosophy, *ontology* is the study of the nature of reality (being) itself.

<sup>19</sup> [original] Riane Eisler (1987) concluded her anthropological [and archeological, based on the findings from Marija Gambutus] survey of the West with the position that "dominator cultures" have oppressed the West for at least 5000 years. The main characteristic of such ("patriarchal" or "pathological hierarchies") cultures is "fear" and "mistrust."

<sup>20</sup> [original] Corradi et al. (1992) provides a good review of the subtle and not so subtle aspects of what they call a "fear culture" [they also called it a "culture of fear"]; whether that is in a democratic country or totalitarian state.

tualization of *anxiety* or *dread*. However, this is all another "big picture" story for another article.

#### Toward a New Story of 'fear': Epistemology

My research on 'fear' [and *fear*] has shown that humans have various ways to know and understand.<sup>21</sup> For our purposes I'll simplify this by saying, to know 'fear' [and *fear*], we first told stories, then we created myths, then we created dogmas, then we created theories, and where to next?—of course, to return to telling stories, but [this time] in a whole new way, from an expanded or transpersonal point of view (i.e., a fearlessness context). The new definition of 'fear' [and *fear*] will be more of a *story* (no less important) than anything else.

The primary motive of all the forms of knowing 'fear' [and *fear*] is to be able to "get rid of it," or at least gain power, mastery and control over it. Therefore in defining 'fear' [and *fear*] one raises epistemological issues immediately [*a la* Maslow's critique mentioned earlier]. I and several mystic-sages East and West, have questioned a dominant traditional epistemology that is motivated to "get rid of" the very subject-object the knower desires to know. Krishnamurti (1973/91) argued well for a new way of knowing 'fear' [*fear*]:

Having never looked at fear you have never come directly into communication with it; you have never looked at fear without naming it, without running away from it, without trying to overcome it (p. 69).... You observe from that [isolated ego/self] centre and you are still caught in fear, because that centre has separated itself from the thing it has called fear; it says, "I must get rid of it," "resist it," and so on; thereby you are strengthening fear.... Can you look at the fear without naming it?—the moment you name it 'fear,' it is already in the past. (p. 67)

My research on 'fear' [and *fear*] as a phenomenon takes me into many books and articles on 'fear' [and *fear*] as well as my personal experiences. It is very common to see authors of all kinds starting to talk about a conceptualization of "fear" and then they immediately talk about "fears"; meanwhile 'fear' [*fear*] itself is not defined or explored any further but rather the focus of attention in the book [or article] goes to "fear of x, y, z"...

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<sup>21</sup> [original] This is a very complex topic. I refer to Wilber (1983) for a most useful survey of the "three eyes of knowing" [i.e., integral epistemology] or of "soul" essential to any spectrum model of any concept be it consciousness or 'fear.' [at this time I was greatly influenced by the creation-centered evolutionary theorists like Teilhard de Chardin, and more particularly one of his contemporaries, Berry (1978) and "The New Story" we needed as humanity in the 20th century and forward].

(fears). There is certainly no discussion of the limitation of ways of knowing 'fear' [*fear*].

The approach of examining one's *fears* is not the same phenomenon as looking at 'fear' [and *fear*] itself. The former is a projection (objectification) of 'fear' [and *fear*]—i.e., an unconscious distancing from 'fear' [and *fear*] as Krishnamurti explained. This is a fine technical issue, with important epistemological implications, but I will avoid going into it any further in this paper. (See Technical Paper No. 2 "An Epistemology of 'fear'").

In my own words, "one cannot know 'fear' [and *fear*], based on the motivation to want to get rid of it, because such a motivation is 'fear'-based itself." This is really the pathological 'fear'-based state of science and objectification that Maslow (1966) critiqued. 'Fear' cannot see itself. In 'fear' patterning we cannot see 'fear' either—at least not in its entirety. We may feel something we call "fear" but that is such a reduced perception and conceptualization of 'fear' compared to a more holistic and transpersonal [spectrum] view as advocated here in this paper. 'Fear' may have become ourself—the knower/seeker.<sup>22</sup> The difficulties of studying 'fear' [and *fear*] are at once both overwhelming and decidedly challenging for the layperson and professional researcher.

I for one, am convinced that 'fear' [and *fear*] research will improve the moment that we make it *pure* research and take a break from all the *applied* research—the latter, with its agenda to "get rid of" 'fear' [and *fear*]—even though in the end it is my contention that it is best to regain 'Love' and to do so we have to heal 'fear' as a complete liberation process. My own interest is doing pure research on 'fear' as a phenomenon of great importance and value to human liberation. Again, in this short paper, I cannot go into the complex issues of the epistemology of 'fear.' Suffice it to say, that in defining 'fear' [and *fear*] a researcher is faced with metaphysical issues of conceptualization involving both ontology and epistemology.

In lay terms, I'm really saying that the definition of 'fear' [and *fear*] is highly determined by the more general conception of 'fear' [and *fear*] and its origins, its nature, its effects on experience and the ideologies, myths, beliefs, values and images that have been learned by the knower in a specific family, socio-cultural context and historical time frame. That learning is so-

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<sup>22</sup> [original] The questions of how to know 'fear' [and *fear*] come from many sources; to name a few important ones, I refer the reader to Krishnamurti (1981, 1991), any of Alan Watts's books, particularly *The Book on the Taboo of Knowing Yourself* (1972); and for the suggestion/data on the notion that humans have become 'fear' itself, see Massumi (1993). We have become 'fear' consciousness itself and thus we identify with the 'fear' pattern as our self. [This is Massumi's well argued point, because we live in a "culture of fear" and it is our background upon which we grow and create identities.]

cial conditioning and in an oppressive society that condition is 'fear'-based conditioning.

There is a strong socio-political agenda to not discover exactly what 'fear' is so that 'fear'-based conditioning practices in a culture will not be discovered and challenged in regard to their healthiness.<sup>23</sup> Because the primary motive to know 'fear' [and *fear*] has been apparently to "get rid of it."<sup>24</sup> This raises axiological issues of moralism as well. Clearly, the value-bias (and consciousness) of the knower is involved in the knowing.

This all raises key questions: how does one know 'fear' [and *fear*] and is there a way to know 'fear' [and *fear*] without all these un-useful biases? Is there a truly universal pattern that can be known about 'fear' [and *fear*] from a transpersonal and transcultural perspective? These questions remain unanswered overall but the reader may answer the questions for themselves based on their own interpretation of my research, as well as their own experience of 'fear' [and *fear*].

### Introduction to Defining 'fear'

I had a recent inquiry from a professor of religious studies,<sup>25</sup> who has been interested in 'fear' [*fear*] and fearlessness:

... if you have any document which summarizes your more precise definition of fear, I'd be glad to see it .... If your researches have enabled you to arrive at a different view, then I'd like to take them into account in the final revisions of my book.

This [technical] paper was initiated to address this request. I feel honored to be asked about my work on 'fear' from such a distinguished researcher. As I come to define 'fear' it occurs to me to ask: who wants to know and why do they want to know? My definition for 'fear' seems to be affected by the current state of my own being. The questions I'm asking about the person inquiring to know more about 'fear' [and *fear*] and how they ask the question are somehow important contexts. It all gets very complex. Yet, I am convinced it is all very simple. 'Fear' may be clever and illusive but it is not that wise, in my experience. I'm certain I would answer the inquirer uniquely each time. The players/seekers in the inquiry play a powerful part

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<sup>23</sup> I have elaborated this exact concern under the label of *fearism* (Fisher, 2006, p. 51).

<sup>24</sup> Today, I still agree with the "pure research" agenda, albeit, I am less convinced it is possible because everything tells me that fear management is actually going on all the time whether we label it and/or whether we are conscious of it. I do think there is a distinction between a healthy motivation and pathological one in the striving to know 'fear' and fear.

<sup>25</sup> [original] Professor John Wren Lewis, University of Sydney, Australia, pers. comm., March 10, 1995. [I don't think he ever used my work, not that I heard of.]



in any definition of 'fear' [and *fear*]. I don't think this is ever addressed [enough].

When I'm asked what is "your more precise definition of fear?," I'm left with a puzzle as to who's definition of 'fear' [and *fear*] I would provide? As a 'fear' researcher, I have come across hundreds of definitions of 'fear' [and *fear*] in many different forms of description from purely metaphorical to metaphysical, to tightly scientific. I could synthesize these definitions (an enormous task) but here in this short space I offer a selected and "random" sample of them, such as:

If fear is a poison....<sup>26</sup>

Fear is a dragon.... Fear is the father of ignorance, superstition, and prejudice.<sup>27</sup>

Fear is perhaps our oldest and deadliest enemy.<sup>28</sup>

Fear is his infernal majesty's most frequently used instrument.<sup>29</sup>

Fear is a behavioral phenomenon....<sup>30</sup>

Fear is an emotional state....<sup>31</sup>

... fear, is symbolic of a deeper but more threatening....<sup>32</sup>

... some fear is instinctual and healthy....<sup>33</sup>

... fear-defined as the perception of a threat that is real or imaginary....<sup>34</sup>

... fear [is] a subjective state of awareness brought about when brain systems react....<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> [original] op. cit. Assagioli (1991), p. 170.

<sup>27</sup> [original] LeBeau (1971), p. 177.

<sup>28</sup> [original] Larson (1990), p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> [original] Kelsey (1978), p. 85.

<sup>30</sup> [original] Salimovich et al. (1992), n.p.

<sup>31</sup> [original] Reber (1985), n.p.

<sup>32</sup> [original] Rachman (1990), p. 206, discussing the psychoanalytic view which is not Rachman's preference or interest.

<sup>33</sup> [original] Jeffers (1987), p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> Lechner (1992), n.p.

... fear [energy] is "reverse-flow phenomenon"<sup>36</sup>  
 ... a spirit of fear....<sup>37</sup>

### What Makes a Definition of 'fear'?

What exactly constitutes a "definition" of 'fear' [and *fear*]? I don't know and I'm not sure anyone does. Imagine attempting to come up with a precise definition of 'Love'? Perhaps, with such large concepts/phenomenon as 'fear' and 'Love' we would better let poets assist us to understand. I do know 'fear' [and *fear*] can be explored as an artist-scientist-philosopher in a type of "renaissance approach." With a new initiative and effort, 'fear' will be defined *better than* it has in the past.

Explication of 'fear' would probably involve a summary and synthesis of 'fear' across the spectrum of ways of describing it. It would also involve sharing experiences we call 'fear' [and *fear*] more readily as part of the public agenda.<sup>38</sup> As well, I would then put together my own synthesis based on the literature and my own experiences. This could constitute a defining of 'fear'—and we may not ever come up with a "precise definition." I am more interested in understanding 'fear' than arriving at a "precise definition."

### From Definition to Pattern, Story, and a Theory of 'fear'

If I took the time to write them out, I'm sure I would have two or three hundred definitions of 'fear' already and this research has only begun. Why limit 'fear' [and *fear*] or any concept of human experience to one definition? or one biased definition? There is a much more interesting aspect to search in understanding the many definitions of 'fear' [and *fear*] across the spectrum of disciplines and human experiences—i.e., looking for the larger "pattern that connects" (*a la* Gregory Bateson) wherein lies all Quality.

If the reader scans over the few "random" samples of definitions and descriptions of 'fear' [i.e., *fear*] above, it is quickly evident that 'fear' [and *fear*] is not going to be easy to define. Definitions that are in some way about "fear is..." emerge into "stories" and metaphors of the origin of 'fear' [and *fear*], its nature, its effects and so on. Although, at this point in time I do not offer a "precise definition" of, clearly, 'fear' [and *fear*] is definable and un-

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<sup>35</sup> [original] Le Doux (1994), n.p.

<sup>36</sup> [original] Telstar (1991), p. 3 ('new age' literature).

<sup>37</sup> [original] Bible, 2 Timothy 1:7.

<sup>38</sup> The critical pedagogue bell hooks said it well: "In our society we make much of love and say little about fear" (hooks, 2000, p. 93).

derstandable in a spectrum approach but this new definition will be more a "story" (metaphor) than a scientific formula.

Pure research on any topic is very rare in these days of obsessive pragmatism and economic accountability [e.g., neoliberalism]. Much of the motivation behind this is 'fear' or Maslow's "neurotic deficiency motivation." I ask the reader to have patience with the development of pure research into 'fear' and if possible to support and encourage such research. It will be well worth it.

The transpersonal level of the "story" about 'fear' would take volumes to develop and thus the reader of this paper will be left feeling, well, short of a satisfying definition/story. In the future, I will simplify that "story" into basic postulates of a theory of 'fear'.<sup>39</sup> For now, I conclude this article with a useful (albeit, controversial) way to conceptualize 'fear' as a *pattern* phenomenon in the human experience. Whether 'fear' is a pattern in the animal and plant experience is another discussion of great controversy for another paper perhaps.

### The 'fear' Pattern

I believe that when 'fear' is conceptualized and defined as a universal pattern of qualities in the human experience then, and only then, will 'fear' be truly understood and its destructive impact on all aspects of human society be completely exposed. Some people have said that I am merely talking about the more ancient concept "evil" and putting it into modern day language calling it 'fear.' There is a lot of truth to that but it is a more complex issue that 'fear' involves because of the more recent information in the sciences in regard to the neurophysiology of "fear." "Evil" is one of the faces of the 'fear' pattern. When the 'fear' pattern is completely elucidated and defined as a formative process—much like a virus—a 'fear' pattern virus (fpv+)—and not a "lump" to be manipulated, destroyed or managed—then we will be able to heal, transform and liberate ourselves completely from 'fear' at its source.

Recently, I have been exploring the notion of the 'fear' Project or principle ("Principality" to use theological language) as a way to describe the 'fear' pattern on this planet. To adopt more classical mythological images and terms I and Wilber (1995) have used *Phobos/Thanatos* to name the 'fear' pattern humans have experienced since time immemorial.

Whatever, the term or image, 'fear' is a dynamic "beast" and the wildest view possible is likely to reveal the most useful information.

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<sup>39</sup> To this date, I have not actually constructed such a list of postulates, although, I do have many writings on a theory of 'fear', yet they are not as precise as I'd like them.

To conclude this paper, I would say that the most useful general way to define 'fear' is to see it as a universal pattern of qualities of the human experience that are:

- not "natural" or part of our inherent Nature but created through cultural conditioning [i.e., culturally constructed]
- do not occur in Nature and are not necessary for survival or creativity
- are man-made and destructive and toxic toward all 'Life' and are different than the "natural" death and decay process<sup>40</sup>
- are symptomatic of non-self-regulation, human suffering, hurting, violence due to oppression

Beyond a doubt these first postulates of a theory of 'fear' will raise many controversial discussions in the future and that is the purpose of the work of the In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute.

I'll risk the temptation for a quick and easy "story" definition: *'fear' is the dominant symptom of hurting human beings living in oppressive societies.*

The word and concept of "hurting" [also trauma] has given me an entirely new context—a healing and liberation context in which to investigate the phenomenon of 'fear.' I look forward to our further research and dialogues.

[original] [Note: Please send definitions and "stories" about 'fear' to the ISOF Research Institute where they will be utilized in this research Project.]

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<sup>40</sup> I think Erich Fromm's theorizing on "biophilic" tendency (or Love forces) and "necrophilic" tendency (or Death forces, or 'fear') would be worth pursuing further.

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