

Fear

Fear and attraction are opposites, When I fear someone or something I want to distance myself from that person or thing. When I am attracted to someone or something, I want to get closer to that person or thing. Or is it so simple?

Let's say that I am a trained parachutist. I am in a transport helicopter about to be dropped behind enemy lines. Below me I watch the jungle landscape sharpen up, the ravines where I will land grow distinct and shadowy as the plane starts to level off; then the trap slot in the floor of the copter begins to creak open and I go into my jump crouch. Am I afraid?. Well I sure was last night, when I woke up at two with my heart slam slamming. I was scared to death. I am still in that fear. I'm still afraid, but how would I feel about backing out? The thought is appalling—if inviting in some sweaty subcutaneous way that could never prevail—and before I give myself the honor of even considering backing out I am rolling over backwards down the slope of a ravine. I had advanced into the center of my fear but not without trepidation. Not without playing with the possibility of backing out.

Let's take another example from air travel, this time from a recent flight of the author. It had been a long flight, thirteen hours, and the author and his wife were just starting to decompress for landing. At that point the turbulence began. Magazines and silverware began flying around the plane as the captain's voice urged us to tighten our seat belts. In the ensuing disorder, for this time turbulence got out of hand--children screaming, dads struggling to relock overhead bins—I found myself palpitating with fear, and threw my arms around the seat back in front of me, and was tossed back and forth with it. Thirteen minutes later I caught a glimpse of my wife, who had somehow wriggled her way to what had seemed to her a safer refuge, a couple of rows ahead of me. We tossed a glance back and forth, when I realized what a foolish position I was in, still clutching for dear life the seat back whose convulsive gyrations had two minutes before seemed the only stability in the cabin. Hadn't I been the perfect instance of the terrified man fleeing into the heart of his terror? Fear generates unpredictable behaviors. You cannot simply flee it, without sometimes fleeing into it.