

THE WRITER

THE HANDBOOK OF FEAR

As the feminist classic Fear of Flying celebrates its 40th birthday, FATIMA BHUTTO, political royalty and part of Pakistan's first family, explores why and what women are afraid of

It was election day last May and I was with my mother, Ghinwa, in Naudero, a small sleepy Sindhi village, going from polling station to polling station. It was the afternoon and the sun was blazing as we walked towards a men's polling station. There were soldiers. There was a refusal to allow my mother—a candidate contesting the polls—to enter the polling station. And before we knew it, there was gunfire.

The soldiers on the roof fired into the open air. The soldier in front of us fired into the ground. A man was thrown on the floor and threatened. When my mother protested, the soldier who stood in front of us raised his weapon and told us to leave.

At no point during all this, did I feel afraid.

Not during the firing, not during the threatening, not during the chaos that ensued in getting the man off the ground and checking to see if he had been hurt (he hadn't).

The purpose of violence is never to make you feel afraid during the moment, but for every single moment you live afterwards. And afterwards, once the adrenaline had worn off, I felt very afraid.

I am lucky to have spent a lifetime surrounded by brave women. My mother grew up during the Lebanese Civil War, my grandmother Nusrat buried more loved ones that one should ever have to, and my friends are spirited and strong. I do not know that we can or should want to totally eradicate fear from our lives. But I do know that women are extraordinarily resilient, and women from the subcontinent especially so. We face tremendous and daunting energy everyday—from society, families, politics—and yet we survive. We survive and fight back to raise ourselves and our communities, to speak freely and live independently, to express ourselves and to make our voices heard. We fight for our safety and protection and to ensure harmony in our worlds. What could be more fearless than that?

Before I knew what it was called or why I felt it, I was acutely aware of the feeling: A knot in my stomach, a slight dizziness, a shortness of breath that made my throat constrict and my heart throb deep in my chest.

Fear has followed me since childhood. Sometimes, I was interested and followed it too. Sometimes, it overwhelmed me and I felt suffocated by it. At other times, I managed to ignore it. But it always lurked, fear has always been somewhere close by. If you will allow me to continue sounding like the heroine in a Victorian novel for

a few more minutes, I will confess that for years I thought it was just me. No one else seemed to drag around this beast, no one else carried around as much fear as I did.

At the height of panic attacks endured through my college years, I suddenly realised that everyone—all the women I knew—felt that same heart-bursting fear too. We just don't talk about it.

If women are told constantly to follow their instincts and to share their feelings, why is fear the one exception to the rule? Is it an instinct we ought to pay more attention to? Or totally ignore?

Here's the thing with fear, though: It's both. It's a yes and a no. It's a caution and hysteria. It's empowering—in that it keeps you alive—and debilitating when you aren't able to observe it clearly. There ought to be a handbook of how to deal with fear (can you imagine a more terrifying read?), but as there's not, maybe we need only a few handy pointers to get the discussion started.

1. Fear doesn't make any sense.

Ontensia Visconti is an Italian novelist and filmmaker and is one of the bravest women I know. Conveniently for our purposes, Visconti began her career in writing as a war reporter travelling to Iraq, Algeria, and Palestine among other war zones, writing and photographing conflict for *La Repubblica* and *The Washington Post*. “The night before I went to Ramallah on my first assignment, a bee flew into my flat in Rome,” she told me when I called her on the phone to ask how she thinks of fear, “and I was shaking with fright. I thought, my god, what am I going to feel in Ramallah if I'm terrified by a bee? But I got on a plane and went, and out there in the field I was completely lucid and calm. More than I've ever been in my life. Fear exists only

in your head.”

Fear is an illusion, it only has as much power over you as you decide to give it. Visconti never let fear stop her. She was later embedded in Iraq, travelled through Peshawar and Pakistan's Tribal Areas, and made a documentary about Fidel Castro in Cuba. (Minutes after I put the phone down with her, Visconti called back. She had remembered something else about fear. “There was also the spider in Kabul...”)

Never take the options that fear throws at you. FEAR will always hand you the most depressing possibilities—the-glass-is-always-half-empty side of life

2. Fear is not an instinct you want to get over.

Fear, like pain, is your body's way of keeping you alive. Without that heart throbbing, how would your body warn you of danger? If you were not afraid of anything, you'd be dead. The feeling you get when you are walking by yourself at night and decide to take a different route, the sense that a certain place doesn't have good vibes, the anxiety that tells you aren't safe around someone—that's fear operating as protection.

So don't struggle against fear. Keep it and learn how to listen to it. Instead, fight your irrational fears. The small voice that tells you you'll fail, that you can't make it, that you're not good enough.

You won't, you can, and you are.

3. Fear and bravery are not mutually exclusive

Bella Pollen, the London-based novelist, and Christa D'Souza, a journalist who writes for *Vogue* and *net-a-porter.com* among other magazines, are not just talented women who happen to be hilarious and beautiful and clever. They are also the heart and spirit behind the Marefat High School in Kabul. Founded in 1994 in a refugee camp in Peshawar and taken home to Kabul in 2002, the school has over 3,000 students and this year Marefat hopes to expand to include more students, including adult literacy pupils.

Pollen and D'Souza often travel to Afghanistan and were there in January when a deadly blast occurred at a restaurant they often visited, further down the road from where they were staying. Luckily, they were not dining there that night. I asked D'Souza if she was afraid then. No she said, weirdly not then, though she admitted: “Fear is the emotion that underlies everything—my life is really governed by fear, actually fear of walking down stairs, fear of the telephone, fear of being told off...”

But Pollen begs to differ. “I like to pretend that I'm brave, I scoff at danger to anyone who'll listen to pump myself up, but underneath I'm a huge coward,” replied Pollen, who, by the way, has climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, written a novel on the Mexican border (where she's spent a fair bit of time), and travelled around Karachi's shrines, port, and bazaars with an enviable calm and cool. “Someone like Christa though—who checks it's safe every time she gets out of the car and who is under the assumption that she's a coward because she's frightened of everything—is the opposite. really feels fear, but she still gets on and does stuff despite it—that's the real definition of bravery in my book.”

By the time these two courageous women left Kabul in January, construction on 28 new classrooms for Marefat students had already begun.

4. Fear is not a good decision maker

When stuck in life and faced with a dilemma, never take the options that fear throws at you. Fear will always hand you the most depressing possibilities—the-glass-is-always-half-empty side of life. Don't listen. Rely on your compassionate, connected instinct instead, the one that operates from a place of love. You rarely go wrong with that one.

5. Fear is like math—and not in a good way

The less you understand it, the more daunting it seems. The only rule to coping with fear is to observe it properly.

Fear comes from the gap between reality and our expectations. It's our assumptions about the future—and our place in it—that can be so terrifying. What if everyone laughs at me during my presentation? What if I never get married/get promoted/grow

up? What if, instead, you didn't expect any of those things but enjoyed every moment of what you had now? (I don't actually know how to do this, but have it on good assurance that it can in fact be done).

Tracey Curtis-Taylor is a pilot and former flying instructor. Last November, she flew solo from Cape Town to Sussex, England, in a 1930s designed open cockpit biplane. Forget the distance for a moment, which is massive. Forget even the 90-year-old plane—with no modern equipment, co-pilot or, let's face it, even any windows. Tracey's extraordinary journey—soon to be the feature of a documentary film—was a constant battle of survival.

Was she afraid? Not of the flight, she replied. “Many people have a fear of flying but my fear only manifests itself when I lie awake at night thinking about the many hazards involved: The wind, the weather, the terrain, the distances, and the machine itself.” It's the



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gap that fear exists so easily in. And none of us are immune to it. But Curtis-Taylor, who is planning another daring flight, this time to India, continued. “I am never afraid when I climb into my aeroplane. On the contrary, I only have to see it to feel a rush of joy and adrenalin at the thought of getting airborne again. So many times during my flight across Africa I was filled with great happiness and a deep sense of serenity.”

As the *Bhagavad Gita* says, “Fear not what is not real, never was and never will be. What is real, always was and cannot be destroyed.” ■