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A Dream: On Discovering the Significance of Fear

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Prologue

This narrative records to the best of my ability an actual dream which I had four or five years ago. When I awoke from the dream, I went immediately to my typewriter and tried to put it down exactly as I had dreamed it. I read through it twice and put it aside, deciding that it was too personal and perhaps too provocative to share, much less publish. When Michael Burns first wrote me about this innovative issue of the *Nova Law Review*, I remembered the dream and, after considerable searching, found my discarded draft beneath one of the piles of miscellany on my office shelves. I showed it to a couple of friends who wisely counseled me to keep it in moth balls. "Who knows. You might want to teach at one of those prestigious law schools one day," they cautioned. "Perhaps you could edit it to make it more abstract and theoretical — less concrete and personal."

Obviously I have given their wisdom little heed. The dream and Roberto Unger's *Passion*, which I recently struggled through, counsel a different wisdom. I have done minimal editing of the original draft, choosing to sacrifice what might have been gained in stylistic refinement in order to preserve the chronology and feel of the dream.

The Dream

I am sitting in a room. On the other side of the room a man and a woman sit at a small table. The room is large, stark and empty, except for the three chairs in which its occupants sit and the table. The man and the woman are talking. They are talking about me. They talk as if

I were not there, although both are obviously aware of my presence.

The man is white, balding, bearded. I do not recognize him, but I know he is a colleague at the prestigious law school where I have been teaching as a visiting professor. He is sitting in the far corner of the room behind the small table. He leans back in his chair. His body language conveys aloofness, arrogance and condescension. Occasionally he looks off into the distance as if reflecting on some important thought.

The woman sits on the other side of the table. She is a colleague at my home school, the University of San Francisco, and a friend. She knows that I am able to hear them but pretends that I am not there. I think that her reason for pretense is her embarrassment for both me and herself. She is embarrassed by my invisibility and by her own tacit complicity in rendering me invisible. But she is not comfortable with confrontation. She knows I am capable of making myself seen and heard. If I choose to ignore them, she will allow it.

My colleague from U.S.F. is defending me, or rebutting the argument which the gentleman from the more prominent institution is making against me. She does not presume to represent me. (Remember that all three of us are acting as if I am not there. And, at this point, I think we may all believe it.) The discussion is about my qualifications to assume a full-time teaching position at the eminent law school where I am visiting. Its tone is more that of an academic debate than a trial or a hearing. Again, I remark on my invisibility because the debate seems less a debate about me and more a debate on the capabilities of my species.

My friend from U.S.F. has just said something in my favor. In the dream, I do not actually hear her words, but she is very earnest. The man across the table barely listens to her argument, though his professorial theatrics mime all the appropriate listening postures. He deigns to listen, but he already knows that she is wrong. He is preparing his rebuttal.

He says, (and I think that these are the first words I hear) "But what has he done, produced? Does he have an area where he can really claim expertise? Why, just the other day I was talking to one of his admiring students. She praised his teaching, but when I asked her if she could direct me to an important and well-recognized scholarly contribution he had made to the field, she could not."

At this point I pick up my chair and cross the room to join the conversation. I must speak for myself. I can no longer accept invisibility. I am not experiencing anger. I don't remember deciding that I must make my presence known and felt. I simply get up and move

because it seems the right time.

"I have done a not insignificant amount of work in the area of equal protection," I say, "particularly with reference to its application to issues of race discrimination."

I say this as if I had always been part of the conversation. The gentleman seems, at first, mildly startled by my presence. But his expression changes quickly from surprise to anticipated triumph. It is a look which says, "Now I have you where I want you." He will test me and prove me a presuming fool.

"What is the significance of fear?" he asks, raising his eyebrows in anticipation of my non-answer. He knows he has won. He will prove his point to the young woman across the table.

I have a sinking sensation in my stomach. My palms are sweaty. I do not know the answer. I don't even understand the question. I have failed my race. For a brief and agonizing moment I am transported back to a first-year contracts class at Yale. One of two black students in the class, I am on my feet struggling to make some sense of Professor Kessler's questions about consideration and my progress up a flagpole.



Fear of differences

Then, just as suddenly, I am back at the table with the professor from the prominent law school who would disparage my collegueship. But, now, I am very calm ("cold" in the honorific sense with which that word is used in the street vernacular). I realize now that I have won. Even before I have conceptualized my answer, I know that I will

triumph. I am no longer struggling to find my protagonist's answer. I am calmly contemplating my own. Because I am now in search of my own answer, I know it is there and that it is right. It just needs discovering.

The answer is not fully given in the dream. But in the millisecond before I wake, it is fully conceived. I have begun to respond, and my protagonist understands that he should have never given me the opportunity.

This is my answer:

The significance of fear must be understood from two points of view: that of the oppressor or master and that of the oppressed or slave. Each of the perspectives must in turn be understood on several different levels of consciousness. The first is the fear of the slave. I begin here because it is the fear that is most apparent and because it is the fear that I know first hand, that I am experiencing at this moment.

I am not certain where my answer is headed; that is, I have not fully articulated the argument in my head prior to embarking upon my verbal response. But I am confident it is there. The words I speak are new to me. It is almost as if I hear them for the first time as they are spoken. But the thoughts they embody are somehow familiar. It is because they are mine. I am searching for *my* answer, not that of the questioner.

This is a sensation I have often experienced in teaching. A student poses a problem. I begin my answer certain of the theme, knowing that I understand what must be understood, but not sure how I will get there or precisely where I will be when I arrive. I am thinking out loud before an audience of 85 students. There are times when I conclude my answer with the sensation that I have listened appreciatively while someone else explains something I never understood before.

All of this takes a great deal of time to write, but in my dream I feel it in its entirety in the time it takes me to speak my opening sentence. To repeat: "The first is the fear of the slave." I continue:

This fear is experienced at three levels of consciousness. At the most immediate level, the slave fears the *physical violence* of the master. It is a violence that may be experienced in many ways — that he will feel the cut of the overseer's lash, or that men, in white sheets, will come in the night to hang and burn him, or that she and her family will be deprived of food and forced to starve, or that she will be beaten by her husband. At this level of consciousness,

the slave does not understand the reason for the master's violence. The master is viewed as hateful, crazy, depraved, immoral. In the extreme, where the slave has been conditioned to self hate, the slave may view the master's violence as justified.

At a second level, the slave fears rejection. [This is the fear I have experienced only moments ago. It is a fear with which I continue to struggle.] The fear is in response to a different form of oppression. The slave has been told and comes to believe that he is welcome in the master's house if only he can prove himself worthy of admission. He feels secure from the physical violence of the whip and the lynch mob. Now he fears the emotional violence of being deemed inadequate, or not being accepted by the master. This fear, like the fear of the battered wife or the godfearing peasant, is even more debilitating than the fear of the irrational whip because the injury is internalized and, in part, self-inflicted.

At the third level, the slave no longer fears rejection because he now understands the cause of the violence he has experienced at the two previous levels. He has discovered the sham of white supremacy, and the divine right of kings and Social Darwinism. He has no respect for those who reject him. He understands that they are not superior, but more than that he begins to suspect that their need to do violence to him is evidence of their inferiority. Again, the slave fears physical violence from the master, this time because he understands its source. If the master suspects his comprehension, he will strike out in a desperate effort to maintain his ill-gotten status.

As I verbalize this thought, I feel myself somewhere between the second and third level. Will the master dismiss my analysis as "intellectually inadequate," as "unsupported by documented evidence," as further proof of my "lack of qualifications"? Will I believe him and accept and internalize his judgment? Or will he recognize that I have discovered his charade and act it out one more time mouthing the argument of "inadequacy," "incompetence" and "lack of qualification," while blacklisting me as "dangerous" behind the scenes? Will he see that I have understood too well and inflict violence by denying me the resources of academia or access to its forums of communication?

I press on, despite my fears, with the sense of exhilaration and fatalism that one experiences in battle. Perhaps I have the skill to walk the tightrope, to tell just enough of the truth to be bought out instead of wiped out. But that can only result in continued enslavement. I am still in the midst of improvisation. The theme is within me but I do not know on which chord it will resolve. Like Dr. J, in mid-flight, I do not

know until the shot is made whether it will be a slamdunk or a reverse layup off the glass.

My answer continues:

From the perspective of the master, there are also three levels of fear. The first level is the fear that the ignorant slave will rise up and kill him. Because he believes in the myth he has created, of the master's superiority to the slave, the violence he fears is an irrational animal violence. If there is anger and hate among the oppressed, it is due to their lack of understanding of their proper place. It is because they have been misled into thinking they are capable of independence.

The second level of fear experienced by the master is the fear that he will be found out by the slave, that the oppressed will discover the sham of a meritocracy where the master defines what is meritorious. He fears that when the slave understands that the master's superior position is ill-gotten, he will rise up in revolt. This is a greater fear than the first because the violence of the rational human being is more certain than the irrational violence of the animal.

The third level of fear experienced by the master is the fear of self-discovery. He fears that in the slave's challenge to the slave system, he, the master, will be brought face-to-face with his own image; that he will be confronted with his own insecurity and inadequacy; that he will understand that his need to define others as inferior and treat them as such comes from his own feelings of inferiority. He fears that his shell game is all that he has, that he is nothing without the slave.

And now I realize that the ultimate fear of the slave and the master are the same. Each is forced to confront his solitariness in the world. Each is compelled to accept responsibility for who he or she is.

The dream ends. I do not know my protagonist's response. It no longer matters.