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FEAR ITSELF

What we learn and lose by being afraid

By **TIM TRAINOR**
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I first met Roanne Van Voorst in the Amsterdam airport. I was a teenager and had just set foot for the first time in a foreign country, where I would live for the next year. My transatlantic flight had been delayed and rerouted (this was before everyone

had a cell phone and a laptop) so Roanne — who had been randomly assigned by the school to pick me up and ferry me safely to my new home — had no idea what had happened to me. I did not speak Dutch, and I was suddenly on a continent where I did not know a solitary soul.

As I waited at the baggage claim, there was some fear. There was also plenty of ignorance and irrational self-confidence, which perhaps was to my advantage. I collected my luggage and walked headlong into the concourse without a clue about what waited on the other side.

It all worked out fine, and my arrival to The Netherlands was announced over the airport loud speaker: “Roanne Van Voorst, please report to the information booth to claim a lost boy.”

After introductions, we took the train back to Utrecht, where we would study journalism and become fast friends.

After I returned from my year of living dangerously, Roanne’s life only got more interesting. She earned her Ph.D in anthropology, specializing in risk behavior. She lived with Inuit hunters in small villages in Greenland, where climate change was disrupting their way of life. She then moved to Jakarta, Indonesia, where she lived alongside illegal slums where flood and disease posed a constant worry. She wrote books. She took up rock climbing. She developed trainings on fear management and adventurous living. She became a digital nomad, traveling the world for work — and love. She got married to a Dutchman living in Philadelphia last year.

And then she wrote “Fear!”, which was published to some acclaim in her native country. Now that it has been translated into English, it offered me the opportunity to chat with her about the book and the strange phenomena of fear.

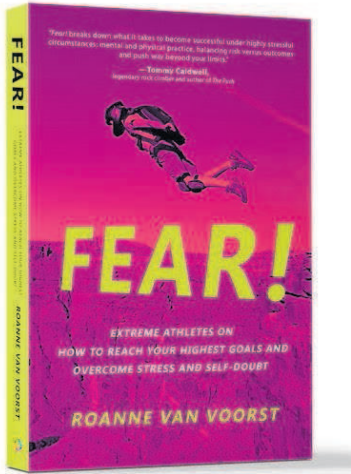
TIM: What makes some people seek out fear, and others hide from it?

ROANNE: How adventurous or scared you are is determined by different factors. While you can be wired to be more or less sensitive to stress, you’re not a slave to your brain. It is possible to learn to become more adventurous and overcome fears through life experiences, just like it’s possible to become more fearful after negative experiences.

The same goes for your upbringing: to some extent, what you dare in life is shaped by the way in which important people around you responded to new or unknown things when you were young. If you grow up with a general sense that the world is a safe place, there is a bigger chance that you will book that



Photo by Gert van Gerven
Roanne Van Voorst climbs a multipitch rock in Gorge du Tarn, France, during a recent climbing trip. Despite her fear of heights, Van Voorst travels the world to climb difficult routes.



around-the-world ticket.

T: Tell me about things you’re scared of. What do those fears say about you?

R: The language we use around fear is fascinating. We tend to say that we are scared, that we “could never do that, because we’re just not brave like that.”

I always tell my course participants: You are not fear. Stop identifying yourself with “being afraid.” You have fears — we all do, but you are much bigger than those fears. And you can learn how to control your fears so that they no longer determine what you do in life.

For example, I have extreme vertigo. But that doesn’t stop me

from rock climbing. I have a huge fear of failing, but I keep writing new books and frequently give public speeches to large audiences. I’ve also struggled with a fear of flying and driving cars after some near-accidents, but nevertheless I constantly travel around the world via air and road. So while my fears are a part of me, they do not determine who I am or how I live my life.

T: Certainly there is an evolutionary benefit to fear. Our ancestors shied away from heights and snakes and volcanoes for legitimate reasons — those things can be dangerous and deadly. How can you draw the line between fear that is healthy and useful, and something that is irrationally limiting?

R: Fear in itself is great. Without it, you and I would not have been able to speak now. You would have fearlessly dove off a cliff and I would have fearlessly run under a car.

The problem is, we often feel afraid in situations that aren’t actually dangerous. They are just unknown or strange, like changing career paths or standing on a solid but very high overlook. In those situations, our gut feeling is protecting us for no good reason. It would be a shame to listen to such a feeling that limits the wonderful things you can do and experience in life.

In my book I describe different

tools that can help you to quickly decide in situations that feel scary, whether you should take the risk or not. They help to distinguish a rational fear from an irrational fear. Rational risk decision-making comes down to objectively perceiving the facts — how likely is it that things go wrong, and if things go wrong, what would be the damage — and counterbalancing those to potential benefits.

T: Much has been made of Alex Honnold (world famous free-climber) and his brain, and the way he understands and approaches risk. He spoke to you for this book. Is there something neurologically different about him and extreme athletes like him?

R: There was some interesting research that showed that Honnold’s amygdala (the part of the brain believed responsible for emotions, survival instincts and memory) is barely responsive to stress. But I don’t agree with the conclusion that many people drew from the findings: That Honnold must have been born fearless, or that he is an adrenaline junkie.

I learned from my own interview with him that if he gets afraid during a climb, his breathing becomes shallow, his legs will tremble, and things will — in his own words — “just not feel right.” Just like what you and I experience when we get afraid. Yet unlike most of us, he has been in so many scary situations that he has grown accustom to them. He also learned to deal with fear to such an extent that he is able to calm himself down quite easily. I don’t think that makes him a weird type of human; it only shows that you can learn or unlearn to be afraid through life experiences.

Think of your first driving lesson and how scary that felt, and how normal it feels now. That’s how climbing in Yosemite feels for him.

T: Do you have a few tips to help someone overcome a debilitating fear?

R: Plenty! Although which method works best depends on the type of fear and the person. If people want to overcome a specific fear, I recommend they follow my online training, read the book and try the methods described that speak to them, or find a coach that can support them.

But just some basics: Shock therapy doesn’t work for most people. If you force yourself to do something that makes you panic, your body will only remember the stress. And next time you’ll be even more afraid. Instead of pushing hard, try a strategic and gradual approach.

Also, practice being afraid. Understand how your body responds to fear. Frequently doing things that are new and a bit scary will help you in this process, and will invite you to apply methods to cope with that stress in a relatively safe environment. If you do that often enough, you will become better at performing in stressful circumstances. Besides, you will gain self-confidence and trust in yourself.

Finally, learn to calm your body and mind instantly. This is a skill that can be practiced through visualization and breathing techniques, and it’s much easier than you think.