

What is fear? Or more importantly, what does fear do to the body? When you find yourself trembling at the thought of something imagined, is it fear or irrational paranoia? Fear, according to Oxford American Dictionary, is “The emotion of pain or uneasiness caused by the sense of impending danger...”<sup>1</sup> Scientifically speaking, this emotion is a series of chemical reactions in the brain triggered by gland in the brain called the amygdala. If fear starts in the brain, then don't we have the power to stop it at will? This means that you create the fear that you experience, so in other words, you are fear. This is a concept that I wish I embraced as a twelve year old.

On a Sunday afternoon in February in 2008 in front of Raleigh's \$1.50 movie theater, I was offered a choice. I could go and see Sweeny Todd, the story of a cannibalistic barber, or I could watch I am Legend, the tale of the only man on earth who survived a viral apocalypse, which transformed some humans into violent bloodthirsty creatures. I thought Sweeny Todd sounded a lot less scary than the second option, but, Will Smith played our protagonist and I enjoyed watching his portrayal of different characters. This swayed my decision and changed the course of my future for month to come.

After the movie started, I began to realize the consequences of my choice almost immediately. The thought of all of my loved ones and their loved ones and so on ceasing to exist terrified me. Still, I sat through the movie hoping for a happy ending. Instead of felling hopeful, I walked out of the theater that day trembling of uncertainty. On the way home, I sat rigidly trying to convince myself that it would be all right but all the while a nagging thought kept retuning saying that this was the last full year I would see on this planet. For weeks after this incident, I sat in paralyzing anxiety trusting that the feeling would pass soon. Unfortunately, several months passed and I still caught myself immersed in a trance. All I could see was what my imagination would let me. I saw the future. I saw future of sickness and evading creatures hungry for my flesh. I saw the year 2009 ending in a rush of evacuations and streets swarming with weak people in HAZMAT suits. My paranoia, at one point became so severe that my appetite was all but nonexistent and I question my motives for getting out of bed in the morning. After all, what's the point of getting out of bed if I'm just going to die in a few months?

Eventually, I recognized that by thinking about this horrid fate caused me to cultivate the fear making it more intense. I began to think about this terrible outcome objectively. I came to such conclusions like; the government wouldn't let this happen and, a virus couldn't have such an effect on a human, etcetera. Then I later came to realize that, by trying to rationalize my fear, I was still thinking about the thing that made me afraid. Finally, to correct my nonsensical paranoia, I simply directed my thoughts to something more positive.

This illusive emotion that has stopped me from experiencing the unknown has inspired me to embark on a project that has taken on a life of its own. Fear is a topic that everyone is familiar with. Every day, we live our lives with caution. My vision for this final project at the Oxbow School is to create a structure that reminds the viewer/participant of their fears. I want my audience to understand how powerful an idea can be and how easily it can be to become engrossed in these thoughts. My goal for is for this sculpture to embody the idea of fear. A small idea that becomes something bigger

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford American Dictionary

and difficult to escape. I plan to execute this concept by constructing a four-foot tall sculpture that the audience must enter. The structure, dark and shapeless, embodies the form of the amygdala, the gland in the brain that control fear. As the participant enters the sculpture, they are forced to crouch low in order to clear the entrance, which then makes the structure appear as a large threatening shadow engulfing the viewer. In the entry, a barrage of invasive zip-ties bombards the participant. The whole time the participant experiences this piece, they will have to endure the powerful odor of tar, adding to the feeling of distress. The scent of tar also would remind the viewer of how sticky tar is. This represents the feeling of becoming trapped on one mind while experiencing a phobia. Scattered about the interior of my work, reflective surfaces show the true source of fear, the individual. This reflects the concept that you are fear, that you have the power and the choice to be afraid or not. As the viewer exits this piece, he or she will leave understanding that fear does not control our lives but rather we control our fears.

The amygdala controls the body's reaction to a perceived threat. The amygdala releases hormones, one of which is adrenaline. Adrenaline triggers the fight or flight reflex in our mind. This reflex is instrumental in deciding whether one would be better off facing their opponent or fleeing the scene.<sup>2</sup> In prehistoric times, when humans were more susceptible to animal attacks, this reflex was crucial to survival. Not only does the hormone adrenaline activate the fight or flight reflex, this chemical shunts the flow of blood away from the digestive system towards leg and arm muscles. This is why one might tremble and lose my appetite in my time of fear.<sup>3</sup> Psycholgytoday.com also states that fear is a very necessary emotion. The website says, "If we couldn't feel it," referring to fear, "we couldn't protect ourselves from a legitimate threat."

Many modern artists also drew inspiration from times of fear. Some of which are Kris Kuksi, Judy Pfaff, Edward Keinholz, and Irving Norman. These particular artists used very different methods to portray a similar theme. I explored these makers' work in an effort to draw inspiration from them. I was most inspired by the work of Martin Puryear. Before I looked at books with his work, I was not sure what shape fear looked like, but after studying his technique, I have come to the realization that his use of that and intricate tangles embodies the notion of anxiety and a stressful situation.

Everyone knows fear. We all understand what it means to be afraid but not many of us know that we don't have to live with fear. Naturally, fear is an instinctual reaction that only becomes paranoia when we dwell on frightening objects and scenarios. One particular scenario is the scenario of a person in a new wilderness environment. These moments in nature evoke a feeling of weakness and insignificant. One such incidence happened to me.

Excitement surged through my body as I approached the trailhead. I couldn't imagine anything going wrong on in this beautiful valley. At least I didn't think so until I was asked, "Why do you think they call this 'Earthquake Trail'?" Will there be an earthquake? I thought to myself. Soon I concluded that the chances of there being an earthquake were slim to none. As I kept walking I notice a sign that pointed out that I was currently on a path that ran next to the San Andreas Fault line, one of the most violent faults in California. Still walking, I read that the trail I was on was named the Bear Valley

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia.org

<sup>3</sup> Fearexhibit.org, Thebodysouldconnection.com

trail. Meanwhile, Jennifer Jordan was sharing an anecdote about how she saw a mountain lion near the path the last time she was on the trail. Mountain lions, earthquakes and bears? What am I getting myself into? I thought.

I kept a steady pace as I continued down a narrow dirt road. Overhead was a canopy of lush native trees. On either side of me were thickets of deep green ferns. A shallow creek followed me the whole trail, babbling in a language that I could not understand. The cool air gently kissed my skin and cleansed my lungs with each step I took. Behind each bend was another wonder to see. Each hundred feet smelled differently than the last. The smells could range from bubble gum to corn chips to maple syrup. As I traveled through this tunnel of trees and terrain I saw such an assortment of trees and vegetation that I had never seen before. I felt as though I had been transported to a time in prehistory. After about an hour, I could begin to feel the dirt beneath my feet get steadily dryer and more covered in arid weeds. When I emerged from the tunnel of growth, I was nearly blinded by a golden valley carpeted in sand. After walking a few feet in this thirsty field, my nose was graced with the distinct scent of the ocean. In a few more feet I could hear the crashing of the sea on the cliffs. I could see the curvature of the earth. I saw the sea holding the sky in an inverse cradle. The blue of the sky contrasted the blue of the tide. My apprehension towards a potential earthquake and animal attack immediately melted away and was replaced with inspiration and awe.

Fear is an emotion. Fear is a reaction in the mind that helps to ensure our safety and make sure we stay alive. Fear is an instinct that occurs as naturally as earthquakes and mountain lions. Phobias, however, irrational paranoia is self-generated. They are created when one dwells on a potentially life-threatening object. These phobias become invasive and they begin to control your body like a parasite. Because these fears are self-generated, they can also be controlled. You can control these fears.

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