Quiet Leadership

Scared to Death

It happens to all of us, moments when we are so scared to move forward, so afraid of the threat, real or perceived, that the idea of going ahead is so far from comprehension, that we stop. We just stop. We don’t know how to quiet our heart, button up our courage, or face the fact that this might be the thing that does us in. Sometimes it is because we learned a hard truth. Sometimes it is because what we are being asked to do is bigger than us, beyond our capacity. Sometimes we are embarrassed, we are afraid of being left, or having to leave. Sometimes it is the boogey man, and sometimes it is a situation we walked straight into, and can’t tell you quite why. We know that inactivity is not the answer, but still, we can’t move.

Being scared does not always make sense.

Being scared is also completely human.

Often, and this is a hard truth, being scared is just because we want to be scared.

We don’t have all of the info, we don’t feel like we have any power, and we sure as hell don’t want to face what we have to face, because we have not really examined what it is we are facing. That’s what Abby reminded me of when she told me her story.

Abby was part of an Americorps volunteer team who stayed with us during the summer of 2021. She and her team were full of life, living an adventure while serving America across the west, and yet ready to go home. They had been to the city, lived in the mountains, learned things about the world, and each other, they never expected to learn. As they sat with us, around campfires and under the trees, I knew that the lessons they were learning would serve them well. That the pain would come back later as wisdom, and the knowledge would offer them a perspective few others know.

Still, when you are 18-20, living away from home for the first time, and under a constant budget crunch, it is perfectly normal to say “I would never do this again.” When you toss in a bruin as a camp visitor, it is perfectly normal to talk about the time you were most scared, which is what Abby did.

From Massachusetts, not Iowa, as I often attributed her to for some reason, she went on an adventure with a friend in California. They set out for a hike, and Abby, who seems at all times both thought-filled and enthusiastic about life, was concerned for her safety, on high alert; bears frequented the area. When she made it around a bend, and looked out across the field, Abby saw several brown bears. Enough bears that her heart stopped, fear took over, and fight or flight became sit down and accept the worst.

She sat on a stump, facing the bears, and knew she was going to die. In her mind there was no way to make it out alive, so she would just wait for the end. Now, Abby tells this story with a calm sense of wonder that she is alive to tell it. She paused for a moment, and we thought about her sitting there, so calmly scared to death. Too scared to fight, too scared to cry, waiting for the end.

If you have read ***Seasoned, The Husband I Never Knew***, you know that Paul has spent a great deal of time around bears, bears and their stories are part of our life, and I must say, I have never seen anyone so calm about facing their demise at the jaws of a bear, but here was this child, this sweet young woman who volunteered 10 months of her life to help others, sitting on a stump calmly facing the end.

That is when her friend walked up to her and quietly said, “Abby, those are just cows.”

Abby got up and started walking forward, over the fear, laughing at herself, and I assume pretty damn glad that wasn’t the end.

And that, dear reader is what I want to leave you with, that fact that whatever you are facing is probably not the end. The thing you are most scared of right now is probably not a bear, even though it has all of the signs of ending your life, it is probably just a cow, and it is probably going to let you pass, let you live your life to help others, with nary a moo or a swish of its tail.