How to be More Courageous in the Face of Fear

When I tell people that I started my own business three years ago, most people say things like, "I could never do that" or "You're braver than I am." When I tell them this is my fourth business and how the first three failed, their eyes get even wider. I must be courageous, stubborn, or perhaps a little crazy (I think it's all three).

Since so few people are willing to call me stubborn or crazy to my face, they focus on the courageous part. How does one find the courage to overcome his fears and take action despite the potential risk? And, even more so, how do you find the courage to start something important when the past seems to say "you've failed before, you'll fail again?"

I've had not one, not two, but three businesses crash and burn. The odds for success the fourth time around were seemingly against me. And yet, we did succeed. In fact, we just had three straight record years. In only three years, we nearly tripled our income from when I was working for someone else.

How did I find the courage to try again and even succeed? Perhaps a trip to 1940's London will help answer that question.

Close Calls

In the fall of 1940, the city of London was bombed for 57 consecutive nights by the Nazi air force. Night after night, more than a ton of high explosives were dropped on the citizens. Homes were destroyed and more than 20,000 Londoners were killed in less than two months.

The horror seems unimaginable...and yet something curious happened: The people of London were emboldened. One American witness wrote:

By every test and measure I am able to apply, these people are staunch to the bone and won't quit ... the British are stronger and in a better position than they were at its beginning.

20,000 deaths in a single city seems like a lot and by no means do I trivialize their deaths, but in a city of London's size at the time, it represents less than one-quarter of one percent of the population. Rather than focusing on the death toll and living in fear, Londoners actually reveled in the fact that 99.75% of them survived. They celebrated their *close calls*.

Conquering fear

Here's what one young woman wrote in her diary shortly after an attack in her neighborhood:

I lay there feeling indescribably happy and triumphant...It seems a terrible thing to say, when many people were killed and injured last night, but never in my whole life have I ever experienced such **pure and flawless happiness**.

Pure and flawless happiness? That seems like an odd response to such a crisis. But the feeling was widespread.

The psychiatric clinics that opened in London to deal with the stress closed down because no one was visiting them.During the harshest three-month stretch of bombing, there were less than thirty total cases of "bomb neuroses." Suicide rates and drunkenness rates actually *declined*. After only a few weeks, most people avoided the evacuation shelters and stayed home with family.

According to a Gallup poll during the raids, only 3% of Britons expected to lose the war. As the raids continued, support for peace negotiations declined. Rather than long for an end to the suffering through a contrived peace, they wanted all-out victory. They stood victorious, much like this iconic photo of St. Paul's Cathedral after a night of bombing:

Here's what J.T. MacCurdy writes in his book *The Structure of Morale:*

We are all of us not merely liable to fear, **we are also prone to be afraid of being afraid**, and **the conquering of fear produces exhilaration**…When we have been afraid that we may panic in an air-raid, and, when it has happened, we have exhibited to others nothing but a calm exterior and now we are safe, the contrast between the previous apprehension and the present relief and feeling of security promotes a self-confidence that is the very father and mother of courage.

Did you catch that?

We're not necessarily fearful of what is to come. In fact, psychologists have proven that once we actually encounter the thing or even we were fearful of, that it's not all that bad (like my experience riding "terrifying" roller coasters).

What we are afraid of the most is being afraid.

The reason I wasn't fearful of starting a new business three years ago despite having failed three times is that I made it through those times. When I started my first business, I was scared of failing. But I started anyway and when it failed miserably a year later, I was still alive, my family still loved me, and I had food to eat (granted, it was mostly Totino's Pizza, but I survived).

My second business lasted a little longer and the next one even longer. Each time, I survived. Each time, there was less fear when I started.

Where Courage Comes From

So where does courage come from? According to MacCurdy it comes from the conquering of fear itself. That "high" you get from conquering fear (the exhilaration he refers to) makes you want more. It proves that you can conquer a fear.

In other words, courage is not something you are born with or without. It's not some magical force that some have and some don't. Courage is the result of facing your fears and proving to yourself that they aren't all that bad.

I didn't suddenly wake up one day with the courage to start a fourth business. I possess no special trait that allows me to conquer my fears and overcome failure. But I did allow myself to realize that when things got tough, they weren't so tough after all.

Fear says "You've failed once, you'll fail again." Courage says, "I'm still standing and I'll continue to stand."

What fears have you conquered that make you feel courageous today?