

Afraid to Take the Leap? Simple Ways to Face Down Your Fears

By Valerie Young

The so-called safe path is always “easier.” Just ask Ursula Clay. Ursula tried to take the secure career path her immigrant parents had chosen for her. In fact, she worked incredibly hard to achieve a level of financial success and security her parents, both high school dropouts, never had. Says Ursula:



“I worked very hard to get through law school at night, all the while working full time and struggling financially. When I finally achieved what I thought was the brass ring - i.e., good salary, fancy title, etc. - it was a thoroughly disappointing revelation that this was the end result of all the hard work. It felt very empty and meaningless, further made so by the birth of my two beautiful children. I just felt as though I could not possibly have been put on this earth to toil way for 12 hour days at a job that kept me away from my family, and which I dreaded going to every day.”

“Unless you walk out into the unknown,” says Tom Peters, “the odds of making a profound difference in your life are pretty low.” After two years of executing her escape plan which included many moments of fear and uncertainty, Ursula is embracing the unknown. “It’s like getting out of college again, and having a clean slate. I do not know where I am going to end up, or what might come my way. In fact, staying home with my kids right now may be the next calling, and after that, who knows!”

Laugh in the Face of Fear

Anyone who has ever ventured out of their safe little world will tell you they had doubts. When it comes to making a major life change, not only is a certain amount of fear perfectly normal, it’s actually helpful. For example, it’s our healthy fears that keep us from jumping off cliffs. And the great thing about fear is that there are always ways to get around it.

So try laughing in the face of fear. Am I kidding? No. Ridiculing your fears is actually a very effective technique for banishing them. Let me show you what I mean.

If I told you the U.S. Senate had just voted to relocate the capital from Washington, D.C. to Las Vegas, your response would probably be something like, “No way!” That’s because the mind rejects that which it considers absurd. It’s the same with fear. The trick is to turn your fears into a ridiculous event in your mind. That way, you allow your natural human reaction to absurdity to take over and dismiss them.

Try it yourself. Take your biggest fear and take it to extremes. Really exaggerate it. Let’s say you’re paralyzed by the fear of failure. Try picturing your entire family, all of your friends, your neighbors, everyone you went to high school with, even your boss, standing outside your cardboard-box home holding up signs that read: We Told You So!

Pretty ridiculous, right? When you realize that your worst-case fantasy is just that – a fantasy – what felt overwhelming will now feel much more manageable.

Change Is Easy – When You Take It One Step at a Time

Another way to manage the fear of venturing out on your own is to start small. If the thought of just up and quitting your day job frightens you, start building your freelance career on the side. Begin with low-risk steps and gradually work your way up to the harder stuff.

You never know what is going to move you to action. It can be a book, something you saw on television, a chance conversation, a workshop... I was flattered to learn that for Ursula that chance encounter happened when in 2003 she “stumbled upon” the Changing Course website. That was enough to move Ursula to start “formulating an escape plan.” She writes, “My plan consisted of figuring what I wanted to do after I quit my job, and putting myself in a financial position that would allow me to walk away from a well-paying, but unsatisfying career.”

Receiving a consistent message that change was possible says Ursula, “had the effect of pulling me back to my escape plan whenever I started fearing the unknown again, or just got lazy.” For Ursula that message came in the form of this newsletter. For you it might be a support group, a coach, or even a buddy who can check in to see how your plan is progressing.

Even though Ursula has taken the leap, she’s now working on the second part of her goal – coming up with ideas for multiple income streams. The good news is that having faced down her fears once means Ursula can approach her new goal from a far more desirable vantage point. “Now,” she says, “I can read the newsletter on my home computer in my sweatpants while my daughter naps, instead of on my Blackberry while riding the 8:02 pm train back to the suburbs from work.” And to just to underscore how excited she is to be embarking on this new chapter in her life, Ursula signed off with, “Regards from the other side.”

Remember, courage is not a matter of losing your fear so you can take action; courage comes from taking action. And that, in turn, helps you overcome your fear. When you can act despite your fears, you will be rewarded many times over. That’s because, as Anais Nin once observed, “Life shrinks or expands according to one’s courage.” Once I found the courage to escape job jail my life expanded in ways I never imagined possible. Life really is better over here on the “other side.” I encourage you to take one small step today to join those of us are enjoying the view from the other side.

About the Author

Off the beaten path career counselor, Valerie Young, abandoned her corporate cubicle to become the Dreamer in Residence at ChangingCourse.com, offering free resources to help you discover your life mission and live it. An expert on the Imposter Syndrome, she's presented her How to Feel as Bright and Capable as Everyone Seems to Think You Are program to over 30,000 people.