

CobaltSaffron

A FREE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

Confronting the enemy

Our thanks to those of you who took the time and energy to respond to our questionnaire. We received a wide range of responses, from highly articulate suggestions and compliments to irrational complaints about things that have nothing to do with the newsletter itself. More than half of our readers did not respond at all, reminding me once again that most of us probably don't get what we want because we never communicated exactly what that is. (I leave the implications of this in human relationships and life in general to your imagination.) But the majority of the responses we did receive have been informative and encouraging.

Speaking of communication and imagination, I recall a homework assignment I was given a few decades ago. I had been studying a martial art, and the master suggested that I work on confronting my fear. The assignment: whenever I see a woman whom I find attractive, immediately go up to her and ask her out for a date, no matter what the circumstance.

Being a bit of a philosopher, before I did anything, I sat back and took some notes. "What's the goal? What's in the way of it?" After some days of contemplation, I had what I thought was a fairly decent construction of the elements at play: 1) Actually, it's not that hard to find attractive women; 2) Physically moving myself within ear-shot of them would also be fairly easy; 3) Wandering around looking for opportunities to expose myself to rejection, negative opinions and criticism from beautiful women was probably the last thing I wanted to do. I had recently read an article that people fear public speaking more than anything else, including, remarkably, death. This project seemed even worse.

I prepared for my first day of homework by performing every single exercise for relieving stress that I had ever learned. Feeling confident and optimistic, I checked myself in the mirror, changed my clothes for the fifth time, and went out to confront the enemy. Within ten minutes I saw a gorgeous young woman in a car stopped at a red light on the street. I paused, wondering if this particular circumstance qualified as "no matter what the circumstance." By the time I had determined that it did indeed qualify, the light had turned green and she had driven off.

I stood there with that strange sensation I've since learned to distrust—a sense of having succeeded in avoiding a real potential disaster, when in fact I had actually done nothing

and nothing had happened. A kind of emotional reorganization of the facts so as to feel relief in having avoided what I feared. This even went so far that I returned to the master and argued that the exercise was foolish, there was no point in demanding something from people I don't know, I wasn't motivated because I wasn't interested in dating unknown women, and it has nothing to do with the martial arts anyway. "That's not the point, and you know it's not the point," he said. "The issue is fearlessness: acquiring the freedom and responsibility to speak and to listen."

Here we go with the big words again, I thought. Freedom and responsibility. Okay, fine, let's play the game. "Freedom from what, and responsibility for what?" He responded, "Freedom from the pouting coward, and responsibility for your delightful brilliance." I asked sarcastically, "What delightful brilliance?" "The delightful brilliance you're going to have to inspire out of the pouting coward."

Devoid of any confidence and overwhelmed with pessimism, I returned to the assignment. Day one was an extravaganza of humiliation amidst sustained terror. By the end of the day, I noticed that my physical response to an attractive woman was one of nausea and panic. I must have accumulated more hostile verbal reactions in that single day than I had through my entire life up to then.

Curiously, day two began well after an unusually restful sleep. I felt less anxiety prior to my first encounter and came up with something to say that I hadn't prepared in advance. The woman even smiled at me, apparently complimented by my request. By the end of the week, I was consistently receiving smiles, laughs and compliments, and had succeeded in setting up three dates. Recovery time after rejection was significantly shortened. My fear was slowly changing into a mild apprehension accompanying exhilaration.

I accidentally discovered two key techniques in the process. First, unimposing sincerity had a higher rate of success than anything else (something all great communicators already know). And second, if I actually listened to the responses given to me, without any defensiveness, I was able to perceive clearly how each woman felt and thought, which freed me from my own anxieties and ambitions, producing a remarkable sensation of relief. Once I found some genuine empathetic curiosity for the person in front of me, my obsessions about my own preferences faded. Real conversations began to take place. I was, in fact, learning how to speak and to listen.

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Eventually, I developed the ability to follow each transition - from anticipation to engagement to completion and walking away - with little or no extra internal dialogue. That is, I was actually present, without ongoing reactive emotions and thoughts about what was taking place. This was really fun, real freedom. I began to understand that everything hinged on the issue of trust, or, more to the point, the inevitable distrust toward someone who was asking for something more. There was in place in each encounter an intuitive dynamic, an extremely quick assembling of information to determine motivation and intention. To succeed in establishing a relative sense of trust in me within a few seconds, I had to convey some authenticity. To do that well, I had to first

go find it in myself. And that's what the fear was all about, taking a risk to reveal what was within me and then being judged and rejected for doing so.

Anyway, like with all pertinent martial arts stories, I discovered that the real enemy was myself. Obviously, I couldn't win by killing the bastard (although that did seem to be one of the better options at the time). Success was all about moving graciously through, not avoiding, the fear that was mine and mine alone. That challenge remains easy to find. The pouting coward is always lurking around somewhere nearby.

Darrell Calkins
September 2005

“Success was all about moving graciously through, not avoiding, the fear that was mine and mine alone.”

(Note: The CobaltSaffron team acknowledges the existence of persons lacking discernment, integrity and common sense, and therefore includes this disclaimer that the above article in no way suggests that the events described therein should be taken out of context and used for any reason whatsoever.)

Comments

Thank you for your comments about the July/August issue of CobaltSaffron. Excerpts from a few responses we received:

“The ingenuity of the newsletter is that it is at once grounded in and a conduit to very abstract concepts. And yet it's constructed in such a way as to be practical for those who wish to make use of what that channel has to offer. I like that flexibility: readers can take as much as they choose to take.”

“This is not exactly what I'd call an "issue #7" of CS, but just a survey... I'd still like to READ the 7th issue”

“I return again to that sense of curiosity where it is so present that it is not noticed as curiosity, but lived.”

“... It's like being confronted with a high water fall which reminds me that there is so much more wonder in our reality than the apparently limited and pale possibilities I manage to build with my insufficient commitment, passion and discipline. Each issue is a further element in the spiral of evolution I'm creating for me and in my network. I read each one several times and continue doing so along the months. At the beginning more (it takes me a while to understand the minimum to follow it, then I start peeling the layers and need time to reflect).”

"I'd have to give it a zero—none of the numbers as a rating really makes sense to me, anyway."

"... as a way to expand my imagination and vision of what life can be and to keep my spirit of the explorer well alive."

"Because it's unique. It often brings ideas or elements to think about subject that matter to me or that question me. I also often find a good timing with my own processes of questioning."

"Every time I open and read a letter, I am surprised by their contents. I remain stupefied by their diversity, each time it is an unexpected universe by the subject but also by the literary form used. For example, the letter in the form of an interview which was surprising, or to have received a questionnaire asking us to contribute to the creation of these letters. It is never the same thing, it's always new, I love it!"

Upcoming event:

RETREAT TO THE SOURCE

2 - 9 October 2005, Gascony - France

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We welcome questions, comments and complaints.

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