

Name _____

Period _____

Date _____

Teacher _____

"What Fear Can Teach Us" By Karen Thompson Walker

Karen Thompson Walker is an American writer and the author of The Age of Miracles. In this TED Talk,

Walker discusses the connection between stories and fear and explains how fear influences the decisions we make. Walker uses the experiences of the sailors on the whaleship Essex to further explore the effects of fear on decision-making. As you read, take notes on the positive and negative effects of listening to fears.

One day in 1819, 3,000 miles off the coast of Chile, in one of the most remote regions of the Pacific Ocean, 20 American sailors watched their ship flood with seawater. They'd been struck by a sperm whale, which had ripped a catastrophic hole in the ship's hull.¹ As their ship began to sink beneath the swells, the men huddled together in three small whaleboats. These men were 10,000 miles from home, more than 1,000 miles from the nearest scrap of land. In their small boats, they carried only rudimentary navigational equipment and limited supplies of food and water. These were the men of the whaleship *Essex*, whose story would later inspire parts of *Moby Dick*.

Even in today's world, their situation would be really dire, but think about how much worse it would have been then. No one on land had any idea that anything had gone wrong. No search party was coming to look for these men. So most of us have never experienced a situation as frightening as the one in which these sailors found themselves, but we all know what it's like to be afraid. We know how fear feels, but I'm not sure we spend enough time thinking about what our fears mean.

As we grow up, we're often encouraged to think of fear as a weakness, just another childish thing to discard like baby teeth or roller skates. And I think it's no accident that we think this way. Neuroscientists have actually shown that human beings are hard-wired to be optimists. So maybe that's why we think of fear, sometimes, as a danger in and of itself. "Don't worry," we like to say to one another. "Don't panic." In English, fear is something we conquer. It's something we fight. It's something we overcome. But what if we looked at fear in a fresh way? What if we thought of fear as an amazing act of the imagination, something that can be as profound⁷ and insightful as storytelling itself?

It's easiest to see this link between fear and the imagination in young children, whose fears are often extraordinarily vivid. When I was a child, I lived in California, which is, you know, mostly a very nice place to live, but for me as a child, California could also be a little scary. I remember how frightening it was to see the chandelier that hung above our dining table swing back and forth during every minor earthquake, and I sometimes couldn't sleep at night, terrified that the Big One might strike while we were sleeping. And what we say about kids who have fears like that is that they have a vivid imagination. But at a certain point, most of us learn to leave these kinds of visions behind and grow up.

We learn that there are no monsters hiding under the bed, and not every earthquake brings buildings down. But maybe it's no coincidence that some of our most creative minds fail to leave these kinds of fears behind as adults. The same incredible imaginations that produced *The Origin of Species*, *Jane Eyre* and *The Remembrance of Things Past*, also generated intense worries that haunted the adult lives of Charles Darwin, Charlotte Brontë and Marcel Proust. So the question is, what can the rest of us learn about fear from visionaries and young children?

Well let's return to the year 1819 for a moment, to the situation facing the crew of the whaleship *Essex*. Let's take a look at the fears that their imaginations were generating as they drifted in the middle of the Pacific. 24 hours had now passed since the capsizing of the ship. The time had come for the men to make a plan, but they had very few options. In his fascinating account of the disaster, Nathaniel Philbrick wrote that these men were just about as far from land as it was possible to be anywhere on Earth. The men knew that the nearest islands they could reach were the Marquesas Islands, 1,200 miles away. But they'd heard some frightening rumors. They'd been told that these islands, and several others nearby, were populated by cannibals. So the men pictured coming ashore only to be murdered and eaten for dinner. Another possible destination was Hawaii, but given the season, the captain was afraid they'd be struck by severe storms.

Now the last option was the longest, and the most difficult: to sail 1,500 miles due south in hopes of reaching a certain band of winds that could eventually push them toward the coast of South America. But they knew that the sheer length of this journey would stretch their supplies of food and water. To be eaten by cannibals, to be battered by storms, to starve to death before reaching land. These were the fears that danced in the imaginations of these poor men, and as it turned out, the fear they chose to listen to would govern whether they lived or died.

Now we might just as easily call these fears by a different name. What if instead of calling them fears, we called them stories? Because that's really what fear is, if you think about it. It's a kind of unintentional storytelling that we are all born knowing how to do. And fears and storytelling have the same components. They have the same architecture. Like all stories, fears have characters. In our fears, the characters are us. Fears also have plots. They have beginnings and middles and ends. You board the plane. The plane takes off. The engine fails.

Our fears also tend to contain imagery that can be every bit as vivid as what you might find in the pages of a novel. Picture a cannibal, human teeth sinking into human skin, human flesh roasting over a fire. Fears also have suspense. If I've done my job as a storyteller today, you should be wondering what happened to the men of the whaleship *Essex*. Our fears provoke in us a very similar form of suspense. Just like all great stories, our fears focus our attention on a question that is as important in life as it is in literature: What will happen next?

In other words, our fears make us think about the future. And humans, by the way, are the only creatures capable of thinking about the future in this way, of projecting ourselves forward in time, and this mental time travel is just one more thing that fears have in common with storytelling.

As a writer, I can tell you that a big part of writing fiction is learning to predict how one event in a story will affect all the other events, and fear works in that same way. In fear, just like in fiction, one thing always leads to another. When I was writing my first novel, *The Age Of Miracles*, I spent months trying to figure out what would happen if the rotation of the Earth suddenly began to slow down. What would happen to our days? What would happen to our crops? What would happen to our minds?

And then it was only later that I realized how very similar these questions were to the ones I used to ask myself as a child frightened in the night. If an earthquake strikes tonight, I used to worry, what will happen to our house? What will happen to my family? And the answer to those questions always took the form of a story. So if we think of our fears as more than just fears but as stories, we should think of ourselves as the authors of those stories. But just as importantly, we need to think of ourselves as the readers of our fears, and how we choose to read our fears can have a profound effect on our lives.

Now, some of us naturally read our fears more closely than others. I read about a study recently of successful entrepreneurs, and the author found that these people shared a habit that he called "productive paranoia," which meant that these people, instead of dismissing their fears, these people read them closely, they studied them, and then they translated that fear into preparation and action. So that way, if their worst fears came true, their businesses were ready.

And sometimes, of course, our worst fears do come true. That's one of the things that is so extraordinary about fear. Once in a while, our fears can predict the future. But we can't possibly prepare for all of the fears that our imaginations concoct. So how can we tell the difference between the fears worth listening to and all the others? I think the end of the story of the whaleship *Essex* offers an illuminating, if tragic, example. After much deliberation, the men finally made a decision. Terrified of cannibals, they decided to forgo the closest islands and instead embarked on the longer and much more difficult route to South America.

After more than two months at sea, the men ran out of food as they knew they might, and they were still quite far from land. When the last of the survivors were finally picked up by two passing ships, less than half of the men were left alive, and some of them had resorted to their own form of cannibalism. Herman Melville, who used this story as research for *Moby Dick*, wrote years later, and from dry land, quote, "All the sufferings of these miserable men of the *Essex* might in all human probability have been avoided had they, immediately after leaving the wreck, steered straight for Tahiti. But," as Melville put it, "they dreaded cannibals."

So the question is, why did these men dread cannibals so much more than the extreme likelihood of starvation? Why were they swayed by one story so much more than the other? Looked at from this angle, theirs becomes a story about reading. The novelist Vladimir Nabokov said that the best reader has a combination of two very different temperaments, the artistic and the scientific. A good reader has an artist's passion, a willingness to get caught up in the story, but just as importantly, the readers also needs the coolness of judgment of a scientist, which acts to temper and complicate the reader's intuitive reactions to the story. As we've seen, the men of the *Essex* had no trouble with the artistic part.

They dreamed up a variety of horrifying scenarios. The problem was that they listened to the wrong story. Of all the narratives their fears wrote, they responded only to the most lurid, the most vivid, the one that was easiest for their imaginations to picture: cannibals. But perhaps if they'd been able to read their fears more like a scientist, with more coolness of judgment, they would have listened instead to the less violent but the more likely tale, the story of starvation, and headed for Tahiti, just as Melville's sad commentary suggests.

And maybe if we all tried to read our fears, we too would be less often swayed by the most salacious among them. Maybe then we'd spend less time worrying about serial killers and plane crashes, and more time concerned with the subtler and slower disasters we face: the silent buildup of plaque in our arteries, the gradual changes in our climate. Just as the most nuanced stories in literature are often the richest, so too might our subtlest fears be the truest. Read in the right way, our fears are an amazing gift of the imagination, a kind of everyday clairvoyance, a way of glimpsing what might be the future when there's still time to influence how that future will play out. Properly read, our fears can offer us something as precious as our favorite works of literature: a little wisdom, a bit of insight and a version of that most elusive thing — the truth. Thank you.

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“What Fear Can Teach Us” Comprehension and Short Response Questions

Directions: Choose the answer you feel responds to the text you read for the multiple choice.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies a central idea of the text?

- A. While stories are usually based on fiction, fears are based on facts and allow us to adequately prepare for threatening situations.
- B. Fears operate through the imagination much like storytelling does, and we can learn from our fears just as we can learn from stories.
- C. Because the human mind is naturally attracted to dramatic narratives, the most elaborate fears usually draw the most attention.
- D. Basing decisions off of a fear or a story can have disastrous consequences for ourselves and others, as neither are based on fact.

2. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?

- A. “at a certain point, most of us learn to leave these kinds of visions behind and grow up. We learn that there are no monsters hiding under the bed, and not every earthquake brings buildings down.” (Paragraph 4)
- B. “just as importantly, we need to think of ourselves as the readers of our fears, and how we choose to read our fears can have a profound effect on our lives.” (Paragraph 7)
- C. “Terrified of cannibals, they decided to forgo the closest islands and instead embarked on the longer and much more difficult route to South America.” (Paragraph 9)
- D. “Maybe then we’d spend less time worrying about serial killers and plane crashes, and more time concerned with the subtler and slower disasters we face” (Paragraph 11)

3. PART A: Which of the following statements best describes how fear impacted the Essex sailors' decision to sail south, according to the text?

- A. The fear of death led the sailors to choose the option that they believed would offer the highest chance of survival.
- B. The sailors' fear of cannibalism overshadowed their sound judgment, so they refused to sail to nearby islands.
- C. The sailors decided to sail south because that was the only option that did not arouse any fear.
- D. The sailors invented stories instead of analyzing their situation, and they chose to sail south because that was the best story.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?

- A. "The time had come for the men to make a plan, but they had very few options... these men were just about as far from land as it was possible to be anywhere on Earth." (Paragraph 5)
- B. "To be eaten by cannibals, to be battered by storms, to starve to death before reaching land. These were the fears that danced in the imaginations of these poor men" (Paragraph 5)
- C. "When the last of the survivors were finally picked up by two passing ships, less than half of the men were left alive, and some of them had resorted to their own form of cannibalism." (Paragraph 9)
- D. "perhaps if they'd been able to read their fears more like a scientist, with more coolness of judgment, they would have listened instead to the less violent but the more likely tale, the story of starvation" (Paragraph 10)

5) Short Answer/Personal Response: How does fear drive action? How are people currently influenced by fear when making important decisions?

12th Grade Emergency Plans

Writing activity

Write a 7-8 sentence paragraph that uses one of the following tones to describe an event you have encountered in the last month. You may only choose one tone to work with. Choose words, phrases and punctuation that help get your point and tone across. We will do this again next week and the week after. Please only use each tone one time!

Tones to choose from:

Angry

Sad

Excited

Confused

Happy

Content

A rap star (appropriate language please)

A drama queen

A Boomer

A millennial

A conspiracy theorist

Quizlet

Week 1 Review Words

Study online at quizlet.com/_885a5b

1. **Abrupt** sudden or unexpected
2. **acute** New, usually of rapid onset
3. **Affinity** A likeness, a kinship
4. **Alleviate** to relieve, make more bearable
5. **alliteration** Repetition of initial consonant sounds
6. **Annihilate** to destroy completely
7. **Countenance** facial expression or face
8. **Discernable** noticeable
9. **doppelganger** a ghostly double of a living person
10. **Emaciated** Extremely thin; wasted away
11. **Futile** useless; hopeless
12. **Hyperbole** exaggeration
13. **Insufferable** unbearable.
14. **Luminous** glowing; illuminating
15. **metaphor** A comparison without using like or as
16. **Onomatopoeia** A word that imitates the sound it represents.
17. **Oppress** to weigh heavily upon
18. **Personification** A figure of speech in which an object or animal is given human feelings, thoughts, or attitudes
19. **simile** A comparison of two unlike things using like or as
20. **Sullen** silent or brooding
21. **Vivacious** full of energy

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Directions: Using the word bank below, determine which word belongs in the blanks using context clues. You will use each word only once. _____/20

Abrupt	Acute	Affinity	Alleviate	Alliteration
Annihilate	Countenance	Discernable	Doppelganger	Emaciated
Futile	Hyperbole	Insufferable	Luminous	Metaphor
Onomatopoeia	Oppress	Personification	Sullen	Vivacious

1. Compared to the Kenmore team which was tired, Niagara Falls was _____.
2. The players were even more excited when they were able to _____ the other team.
3. Kenmore's efforts were _____ and hopeless.
4. Niagara Falls felt that the all the whining from Kenmore was _____.
5. Furthermore, the yelling from Kenmore's coach began to _____ the Falls players.
6. In effect, the Niagara Falls team came down with _____ and _____ migraines.
7. In order to _____ their headaches, the teachers offered the team some Ibuprofen.
8. The teachers acts of kindness proved their _____ for helping others.
9. After the team members got rid of their headaches they were no longer sad or _____; instead, they were _____ with a happy facial _____.
10. The whole team started to cheer, "We **brutally beat the Bulldogs!**", which is an example of _____.
11. The English Department recognized this _____ use of figurative language and was elated!
12. As the crowd looked across the field, they saw that there looked to be a _____ of Meek Mill, except he looked more skinny and _____.
13. **He was as skinny as a toothpick**, and this is an example of a _____.
14. In fact, **he was a toothpick!** This comparison is known as a _____.
15. One Wolverine fan then noticed **she was so hungry, she could eat a hundred Taco Bell tacos**, which is an example of _____.
16. However, that fan then became **distracted by a piece of paper that appeared to dance across the sky**, which is an example of _____.
17. The Wolverines gave a resounding "**Howwwl**" because they were the champions and their shouts of joy is an example of _____.

***Challenge: Using at least 15 of the words from the word bank, create your own sentences using the words correctly in context.

12th Grade Emergency English Assignment

Journaling assignment weeks 1, 2 and 3

For this assignment please write a journal entry of 2 paragraphs (8-9 sentences) that addresses one of the following topics. This assignment will be duplicated for the next 2 weeks. Please only write about a topic once. Choose from the following topics. The entry can be about how this topic relates to your life. Please either type an entry and email it to your teacher (skutis@nfschools.net, cgrzeskowiak@nfschools.net, achiarella@nfschools.net) or write a response, take a picture of it and send it via email.

Topics (only do a selected topic once)

Isolation

Quarantine

Family

Food

Social distancing

School ...online

Friends

Sports (or the lack of)

Screen time

Work

Covid-19