

Is My Survival Really at Stake?

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Imagine with me, for a moment...

You walk up to your house or apartment, and there is a strange woman alone inside. You don't know who she is or where she came from. Can you trust her? Can you believe what she tells you?

Maybe. If she is calm and friendly, and explains that she was let in by your mother, she knows your mother's name, and your mother will be right back... maybe you can.

Would it matter what race she is? If she is black (or white or ?) and your mother makes it a point not to associate with blacks (or whites or ?s) would that make a difference? Would it matter if she were a man? What if he was dressed strangely, or carried a gun?

My point here is that many aspects of appearance can make a difference in identifying a friend or foe. If we've been TAUGHT that it's a matter of survival, and our fear is triggered, then we have a prejudice that we use to defend ourselves.

Pre-judging is an instinct, and it serves a purpose. You need to pre-judge a stranger, comparing them to your beliefs about what is safe and what is not, in order to determine whether there is a threat to your safety or survival. It's hard enough to trust people that you know and love, much less someone from another race, another religion, or even from another country. We see this in our everyday lives. We all have prejudice. It is a survival mechanism.

Many of us have some kind of prejudice based upon the APPEARANCE of a person. It is taught to us with the intention of keeping us safe. As we know, it often goes far beyond that. We're also taught to have prejudice against other people's IDEAS.

If you don't fully trust someone, whether as a prejudice or from a valid prior experience, it's very hard to listen to his or her side of the story. Impossible, in fact. Your survival instinct tells you that you can't trust them. Therefore, anything that they say is suspect. If

they make a statement that appears to deny your beliefs, instead of responding rationally and consciously, you may begin judging, blaming, using sarcasm, arguing, persuading, looking to others for support, or running away. In more severe cases, escalation occurs, which can lead to fighting, feuding, or war.

Unfortunately, many of us have these primal, fear-based reactions to things that DO NOT threaten our safety. Once more, I need your imagination...

You're sitting at a large family dinner, and your sister has invited a man that you don't know. He seems nice enough as you chat before dinner. But when dinner is served, the mood shifts. He makes it a point to refuse the meat. He casts disapproving glances around the table towards everyone enjoying their beef. Before dessert, he launches into a lecture about the fact that eating meat is uncivilized.

Now, if you're one of the meat eaters, he's just called you uncivilized. He is stating his opinion as a fact, in a way that denies you and your opinion. If you accede to his viewpoint, it threatens your perceived survival (giving up meat.) He may live just across town, but suddenly, he's a foreigner. He makes you feel judged and blamed. So you can't trust him. And you can't allow yourself to believe what he says.

We all can relate to ideas and beliefs held so dearly that they must be defended. We fight for them ferociously. So I call them Ferociously Held Beliefs, or FHB (for short). We all grew up with them. Some have a larger number, or have them more deeply held than others. And they don't all have to do with survival. Another important thing about FHBs is that they are often based upon assumptions, which when analyzed, turn out NOT to be correct.

FHBs stand squarely in the way of conscious relationships, both with ourselves and with others. By their nature, they stir the survival instincts in us... the fight-or-flight reflex that we share with the animals. We tend to lose some (or all) of our awareness and our ability to reason when we go into survival mode. We tend to overreact compared to what is actually warranted.

Even people that we trust can trigger our FHBs.

There is a story of two women friends making dinner for their church group for the first time. An argument broke out between them about preparing the roast beef. Mary said that her mother was the best cook she'd ever known, and her mother taught her to always cut the ends off the roast. Marjorie countered by saying that she had made many delicious roasts without ever cutting the ends off. Both women were completely convinced that they were right, and the other was wrong. As they got more and more upset and angry, Mary had a great idea. She grabbed the phone and dialed her mother's number. When her mother answered, Mary said, "Hi Mom, I need you to explain to this woman why we have to cut the ends off the roast before we cook it." Her mother paused a moment, and then laughed. "Oh Mary," she said, "I only cut the ends off the roast so it would fit in my pan!"

In this case, misinterpretations of childhood experiences, of which Mary wasn't even aware, caused a serious, but unjustified, argument between good friends. It was lucky that Mary's mother was home, because it might have gotten much worse. As it was, they had a good laugh, and it was soon forgotten.

Knowing about FHBs can help us in several ways:

When we recognize that another's FHBs are triggered, we may make a conscious decision NOT to engage them in an argument. We can tell ourselves quite honestly that they are not able to rationally discuss the issue. Their FHBs require that they deny your beliefs, no matter how persuasive or reasonable your position. So the best course of action may be to walk away, while reminding yourself that your beliefs are OK, too.

Sometimes, when we witness someone else's FHBs being triggered, but they aren't directed at us, we have the opportunity to defuse the situation. We can gently remind both parties that their beliefs are valid, and ask them to "agree to disagree."

If we can begin to identify our own FHBs as impediments to conscious relationships, we can watch out for those triggering events, and try to head them off. Identifying when our own FHBs are triggered is much more difficult than detecting them in others. When our nervous system goes into fight-or-flight, it severely limits

our conscious ability to intervene. But the advantages of doing so are vast.

If you're aware, when it happens you can bring the feelings and assumptions into conscious awareness and begin to shine the light upon them. By this I mean that you QUESTION your assumptions, to see if they are valid and whether they apply in this situation. Many times, they don't.

Being aware that YOU are overreacting will often allow you to reduce the bad feelings you hold towards the other person. You may even find that this causes a softening of their feelings towards you.

Just recently, I had an opportunity to catch myself in this trap of overreacting. On our message boards here at ConsciousLoving, I was having a discussion about the Iraq war with one of our members. She works at an Army base, and she boasts about being a conservative Republican, pro-war, and pro-Bush. I had posted a letter from the son of a friend (living in Spain), in which he describes the difference between the European media and the U.S. media in reporting the war. She questioned the truth of his statements, and questioned whether his work (studying Middle Eastern religions) was valuable.

My FHBs were activated. I asked her if she felt that we should just exterminate the Middle Easterners. I wasn't being rational. I didn't think it through. I knew her well enough to know that she is a caring, intelligent person. When I examined my assumptions that led me to make this insulting statement. I realized that I had reacted inappropriately, and I apologized. I wished that I had never said it. But it was too late to take it back. So I did the best I could, and told her and everyone that I was overreacting. She thanked me for my apology, and together we've defused the situation.

I try not to judge or blame myself, or others, for having FHBs. They're a product of our instincts for survival, our childhood training, and our life experience. Our fears are trying to protect us. If you can learn to identify the feeling of these fears in your body, and become aware when they are activated, you can thank them for their honorable intentions to protect you, and let them go if they no longer serve you. A tall order, I know... but definitely worth it!