

The Wolf of Chocolate Avenue

Panicked by the rapid footsteps closing in behind me, I began sprinting as fast as I could. My heart was racing, my chest became tight, and I struggled to breathe. A pack of wolves was chasing me. The alpha male-targeted me for some reason, and I was the pack's prey. Maybe they sensed weakness or vulnerability. The wolf pack chased me for an extended time, and I could feel they were about to catch me.

I dripped with sweat, fearful of what was about to happen. Exhausted from the chase, I slowed and was attacked by the pack. Amazingly, I found the strength to fight back and somehow escape. I was severely injured. It would take a long time to heal and overcome my fears. I couldn't shake my experience with the alpha male and his pack. I was always fearful that another pack of wolves was waiting for me wherever I went. I wanted to ensure no one saw any weaknesses or vulnerabilities out of self-protection. I didn't want to become a target again, someone's prey.

During my last year at Hershey Chocolate, I was targeted by Mal Boss and his pack of wolves. Mal was the Sales VP and was an intimidating figure. He had wolf-like features. One blue eye and another green. Grey hair and a skin color to match. His ears were always on alert, sensing opportunities to pounce on someone. He'd earned the reputation as a dictator. It was his way or the highway. If you didn't conform to his methods, he'd devour you... Your career at Hershey would be over.

At first, Mal Boss liked me. I came out of the Sales Development program, a two-year Hershey boot camp for high potentials, and was assigned as the Hershey market key account manager. I excelled in the Sales Development role, and Mal appreciated my *get it done* aggressive nature.

But I was over-confident and made some political mistakes

early on. For example, I was assigned to call on Giant Foods Headquarters in Carlisle, PA, just outside Hershey. Because of the headquarters proximity to the town of Hershey, several Hershey Chocolate executives, including Mal Boss, were involved in the account. Giant Food's management told me they wanted me to be the only call point; "too many chiefs in the teepee," they said. I told Mal, and he didn't like it. But he agreed to withdraw from the account and see what would happen.

I felt empowered to make decisions with Giant Foods management. We implemented vital product selection and promotion changes to improve the business collaboratively with the buyer.

But Mal disagreed with the decisions. And, he held a grudge against me for his withdrawing from Giant's business.

That's when the chase began.

Mal Boss started scrutinizing every plan I developed and the decisions I made. During meetings, he'd publicly challenge me and demean me in front of my peers. I stopped being invited to crucial Hershey meetings. He pulled all administrative support. And Mal personally reviewed all of my expense reports looking for something wrong.

Then, his pack began to surround me.

Hershey, PA, is a small town. When my family lived there, the population was 12,000 people, and 5,000 of them worked for Hershey. I was literally under a microscope because of my key account role. Every new product launch or promotion execution was there for everyone to see – the good and the bad. If something were wrong, I'd get the call to fix it. The scrutiny became more intense as Mal Boss encouraged his pack to contact me if something was amiss. And, they did.

I worked even harder, hoping that my performance and results would speak for themselves. But it got to the point where it

seemed I couldn't do anything right. My negative self-talk was deafening, and the stress was overwhelming. I remember I got a twitch in my right eye that wouldn't stop. I couldn't sleep and was continuously anxious. I was scared of losing my job, frightened of failure, afraid of letting my young family down, petrified of being stuck in Central PA, and worried I'd be unemployable. I began believing I was a failure, a loser. Mal Boss and my circumstances were crushing me. I was in a doom loop and felt hopeless.

Then, I prayed.

I told God about my circumstances, which he already knew. I pursued him, his protection, and his refuge. I asked God for courage and that he'd help me find a way out, a way to elude the wolves. And, I gradually began replacing the negative self-talk with positive inner conversations.

God strengthened me as I trusted him. He restored my hope. I found the confidence to pull things together and put an exit plan in place. I began working with an executive recruiter and eventually landed my dream job with The Coca-Cola Company. Our family moved back to the Southeast, and my salary increased by 30%! God was good.

Through the interview process, I realized that my experience at Hershey prepared me to secure my new role. But I was still injured from Mal Boss and the wolf pack attacks. For years, I didn't trust upper management. I was fearful that all managers were like Mal Boss. Out of self-preservation, I wouldn't say much in front of them. And when I did, I'd stutter and stammer through my comments, just waiting to be challenged or embarrassed. Also, I ran out of fear that something would go wrong and I'd be fired.

It took a long time to heal these wounds and overcome my fears. It wasn't easy. God continued working in me and changing me from the inside out. Eventually, I realized that

everyone I encountered wasn't out to get me. It was okay to make mistakes. And that there are some great people leaders out there!

For the believer, what is the key to overcoming fear?

Overcome Fear with Faith

Fear is a powerful human emotion that impacts everyone, including leaders. Fear is triggered when you anticipate physical harm or a perceived threat. Fear elicits physical responses like sweating, rapid heartbeat, and weakness. Apprehension creates doubts, insecurity, and low self-esteem. Fright also evokes apathy, inaction, and ignorance. Chronic fear can impact your overall well-being. Fear can cripple and render you ineffective.

Studies show that top fears include failure, success, dying, commitment, public speaking, rejection, making the wrong decision, criticism, taking responsibility, and the unknown. (Aside from dying, which of those *don't* leaders face daily?) Other fears include being found out or exposed, not living up to expectations, making people mad, conflict, being honest, and fearing what others think. That's a pretty exhaustive list.

I learned a long time ago that *fear* stands for False Evidence Appearing Real, meaning that one's perceptions drive negative emotions and thinking. For example, everyone engages in a daily conversation with themselves. Studies show that we have "12,000 to 60,000 thoughts per day, and as many as 98 percent of them are exactly the same as we had the day before." [i] This self-talk is often unconstructive and damaging. As a matter of fact, eight out of ten thoughts we have each day are negative.[ii] Do the math. That's up to 48,000 negative thoughts daily. Don't believe me? Think about the lies you tell yourself every day. Have you ever found yourself thinking:

I am unworthy.

I can't lead.

I am a failure.

I'm not good enough.

No one loves me or cares for me.

I don't belong anywhere.

I have no purpose.

I'm weak.

This will never work.

I must be perfect.

It's too late to pursue my dream.

The battle against fear begins in your mind. With all of the negative thoughts, where do you turn? How do you overcome fear?

Christian leaders overcome fear through faith. They understand that fear or faith will rule their hearts and minds depending on which one they feed the most. If you feed your fears, they will dominate. If you feed your faith, fear will diminish. Activate your faith and seek God in times of despair, doubt, panic, or terror. Here are a few ways how:

Pursue God. Pray, worship, and read his word. Lean into and earnestly seek him. The Bible says, "I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears" (Psalm 34:4 ESV). If you pursue God amid fear, he'll encourage, strengthen, and deliver you.

Take refuge in God. God will provide protection and safety in times of distress. The Bible says, "God is our refuge and

strength, a very present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46:1 ESV). Look to him, and he’ll shelter you.

Stop the negative self-talk. Make the intentional shift toward more Christ-centered and positive thoughts every day. “Take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5 ESV). What if your self-talk sounded more like?

Because of Christ, I am worthy.

I can lead.

I am successful.

I’m good enough.

I’m loved and cared for.

I do belong.

I have a purpose.

I’m strong.

This will work.

I can make mistakes.

It’s never too late to pursue my dream.

Fear is infectious, and followers won’t support or commit to you if they sense fear within you. On the other hand, courage is just as contagious, and people will follow if they see courage within you.

Are you struggling with fear? I learned to pursue God, take refuge in him, and stop the negative self-talk. Learn from my experience and practice the above principles. You will overcome your fears and become a courageous leader if you do!

Want to learn more about how to become a courageous leader? Visit my website, prestonpoore.com, today!

Cheers,

Preston

^[i]http://www.jenniferhawthorne.com/articles/change_your_thoughts.html

^[ii][Ibid.](#)