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Slaying Your Inner Dragons

by Steve Gresham

At one time or another all of us have said or done something that was contrary to our own best interest, damaging to an important relationship or just plain wrong. We kind of knew it at the time, but we went ahead and did it anyway. The question is, why?

I learned about the Seven Dragons from Laurie Skreslet, the first Canadian citizen to reach the summit of Mount Everest. Laurie has spent many years living among the Tibetan people and the sherpas who guide clients up the mountain. They have taught him much about human nature, and the ways in which each of us can unwittingly become self-saboteurs.

The Seven Dragons are fatal behavioral flaws that can consume your energy and detract from your best efforts. They are based, says Laurie, on lies you have told yourself — typically lies that are intended to quell fears you may have about your life. Here are the Seven Dragons, and the false beliefs that sustain them:

1. Arrogance — you are better than others.
2. Self-Deprecation — you are worse than others.
3. Impatience — there is not enough time.
4. Martyrdom — you are a victim.
5. Greed — you don't have enough.
6. Self-Destruction — you will not succeed.
7. Stubbornness — you are weaker than others.

Again, these dragons ultimately emanate from fear — and fear distorts reality. Climbing Mount Everest, Laurie has learned that when fear takes over, people make bad decisions and behave irrationally. When you are aware of your fears, however, you can address them, channel your energy and adjust your behavior.

The challenge is not to destroy these Dragons, but to tame them and control them, because each one has a positive as well as a negative aspect to it. Now, let's take a look at the seven Dragons, and consider the positive and negative aspects of each:

ARROGANCE

Remember, the Dragon of Arrogance has its roots in the fear of being judged. You nourish it with the rationalization that if judged, you will be found to be better than others. But what if you are not? And who is doing the judging anyway? The answers to these questions — which are different for every person, depending on their unique life circumstances — will help you keep this Dragon at bay.

SELF-DEPRECATATION

Gary Cooper was one of the most beloved movie stars of all time, and a talented actor to boot; twice he was honored with an Academy Award for Best Actor. Yet, decades after his death, the quality for which Cooper is best remembered is his easygoing, aw-shucks demeanor. Even at the height of his success and popularity he exemplified humility, which is the positive aspect of the Self-Deprecation Dragon. That humility was rooted in context; Cooper knew very well that in the grand scheme of things, actors — even very popular ones — don't play a very essential role in the betterment of society, and that luck often has as much to do with success as skill. But he didn't indulge in self-abasement, which is the negative aspect of this dragon. He didn't feel a need to trivialize his achievements or apologize for his success.

IMPATIENCE

This Dragon looms especially large on the American landscape, as many of us feel overwhelmed with having too much to do and not enough time to do it. With proper control, the Dragon of Impatience can be very motivational, compelling us to make the best use of our time and work on multiple projects at once. The negative aspect is intolerance, demanding that the world operate on our schedule.

MARTYRDOM

The positive aspect of the Martyrdom Dragon is selflessness, taking action on behalf of others with no thought to personal gain. The negative aspect is victimization: sacrificing one's own needs and wants, becoming a slave to the expectations of others and constantly caving in to their demands — no matter how inappropriate or outrageous.

GREED

This Dragon is especially well known in the financial services industry, and it stalks clients as well as advisors. Greed can compel people to want more, to improve themselves, and seek to do bigger and better things. If left unchecked, however, Greed can lead to insatiability and even miserliness. Remember Scrooge? Leona Helmsley? Jeffrey Skilling? These individuals were phenomenally wealthy, but their insatiable appetite for money prompted them to make poor decisions for which they paid a very high price.

SELF-DESTRUCTION

This Dragon is a more extreme variation of the Dragon of Martyrdom, and is one that warrants constant vigilance. Based on the fear that you are unworthy of success and nourished by the rationalization that you will not succeed, the Dragon of Self-Destruction will set you up for the failure that you think you deserve. How can there possibly be an upside to this Dragon? It can compel you to make sacrifices for the benefit of others, and put their needs ahead of your own — which at times is appropriate, even desirable. But this most dysfunctional of Dragons stands on a slippery slope, ready to drag you down to the point of self-annihilation if you don't keep a careful watch.

STUBBORNESS

Burger King built a successful marketing campaign around the concept of having it “your way.” We all like to have things our way — preferably all of the time — but that rarely happens. The positive aspect of the Dragon of Stubbornness is determination: We decide upon a course of action and stick with it. The negative aspect is obstinacy, digging in our heels and refusing to deviate from our position — even when it may be in our best interest to do so. This Dragon draws its strength from a fear of being viewed as weak or spineless if we allow others to influence our decision-making, or tell us what to do.

Managing your Dragons means recognizing and understanding their positive pull as well as the destructive potential of their negative pull. If you know your Dragons, you can catch them as they affect you and starve them of attention before you are drawn too deep into their lairs.