

# Compass

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## Fey Lure

*"Another Viking term was 'fey.'... The Old Norse word meant 'doomed.' It was used to refer to an eerie mood that would come over people in battle, a kind of transcendent despair<sup>1</sup>." Lee Sandlin*

Now that we've had six full months to contemplate this new world, now that Mr. Greenspan has declared the recent threat of recession over for now, we can slow down for a moment and consider the brink we've so recently found ourselves poised upon. On September 11, 2001, we learned some shocking news: an essentially invisible force was undermining our old status quo. This was not really news, but it certainly felt like news.

A New Yorker article reporting the events of that day described an encounter between a policeman and a middle-aged man in a ragged, dirty dress shirt. The policeman, thinking the man was in shock, asked if he knew where he was. The man, looking back from a sweat-streaked face, told the cop that he had never been so aware in his life, and that he

hoped he would never fall back into his former state.

I'm with him! My life has been like a movie since 9/11/01, presenting lessons in the brilliant Technicolor that heightened awareness brings. Here's an example:

I report to an airport to catch a flight home after an exhausting week's work. I start through the security checkpoint, comfortably anticipating the required juggling. I almost have enough hands to pull my Powerbook out of its roll-away case while slipping my identification from its wallet, while, simultaneously placing my coat, my cell phone, and my book bag onto the conveyor.



As I pass beeplessly through the metal detector's arch, a slight man resembling one of those ferret-faced Gestapo agents who were always in cahoots with the Vichy French in World War II movies, steps up and tags me. Would I mind stepping over to this table for a more thorough security check?

He didn't seem interested in an honest answer. Of course I mind! I would have to be fey not to mind! But I sensed that I was supposed to pretend that I didn't mind, so while the sarcastic five year old's voice in my head said, "I was hoping you'd ask to rifle through my stuff," my audible voice simply said, "Sure." No one noticed the puff of white steam rising out of the top of my head.

*"It was because feyness poisons ordinary life that British writer Walter de la Mare could in 1943 begin a poem about the English countryside with the line 'No, they are only birds' and not bother to say what he'd first thought they were. Everyone knew; they had learned the reflex of sudden terror, followed by infinite relief, triggered by the sight of small black forms moving quickly against a bright sky."*

This inspection wasn't unusually humiliating. The routine string of demands phrased as questions: "Do you have any metal objects on your person?" "Would you mind holding your belt buckle inside out?" "May I pass my hands down the middle of your back and down the back of each leg?"

"Why?" I responded to this last question, hearing my voice shaking.

Continued ...

<sup>1</sup> Italicized quotes are from: *Are We Finally Losing the War?* by Lee Sandlin 1997, *The Chicago Reader*

"So I can confirm that there's nothing there," the ferret replied. (He had just completed three circumnavigations of my body with his metal detecting wand.)

"What are you looking for?" I asked, feeling violated now.

"Something that's not supposed to be there," the ferret replied.

"Well," I instructed, "Be careful! My back is very tender and my right leg is aching almost unbearably. I don't want you to hurt me." (This was an accurate statement of fact, but I felt guilty disclosing it, like my backache was somehow threatening national security.)

The ferret gave no response. He patted me down and, in so doing, removed about half of my dignity and most of my remaining sense of security.

*"World War II went on so long that both soldiers and civilians began to think of feyness as a universal condition. They surrendered to that eternity of dread: ... the implacable cruelty of an occupying army; the panic, never to be overcome despite a thousand false alarms, at an unexpected knock on the door, or a telegram, or the sight out the front window of an unfamiliar car pulling to a halt. They got so used to the war they reached a state of acquiescence, certain they wouldn't stop being scared until they were dead."*

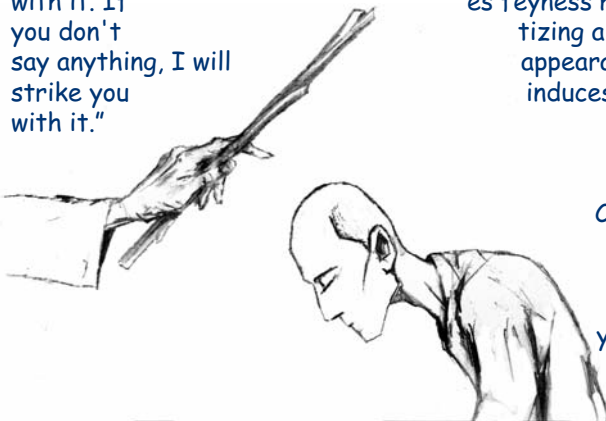
My acquiescence has not kicked in yet. I still feel the affront, the inconvenience, and the rising blood pressure. Like the grimy New Yorker, I hope I will not return to my complacent former self as long as these indignities continue.

There's no end to the opportunities for becoming fey, particularly in this newly uncertain world.

Every project worker meets endless opportunities for feyness, too. Remember that sense of hopelessness rising in your chest when your sponsor asks how long the project will take, before you have defined the target? You'd love to respond with a simple answer, but that simple question has no simple answer. You know about the helplessness that washes over when your customer asks you to explain one of the whys, as if simple cause-effect determination could explain anything. Such simple questions double bind, creating a "when did you stop beating your dog?" desperation that, in the moment, leaves you forgetting that you don't even own a dog.

### Failing To Communicate

A Zen master holds a stick over his pupil's head and says, "If you tell me this stick is real, I will strike you with it. If you say to me this stick is not real, I will strike you with it. If you don't say anything, I will strike you with it."



The recipe for inducing feyness has been well-known to science for a generation and well understood by Zen masters for millennia. My interactions with security personnel bear a subtle resemblance to some of my more confusing project interactions, where it seems that if I disclose my truth, someone will just bludgeon me with it. Such double-binding experiences easily induce feyness.

Inducing feyness is shockingly sim-

ple, so easy that most do it unconsciously. Feyness comes from systematically denying the conspicuous, from stifling obvious meanings. Fey-inducing interactions reward ignoring while punishing any attempts at clarifying. For example, the ferret ignored his search's inconvenience, neither apologizing or offering to discuss his intrusion. He bristled when I asked for clarification.

### The Recipe for Inducing Feyness

1- Take two or more persons with opportunities for repeated interaction,

2- Add a less than innocent question, imbedded with conflicting tones,

3- Enforce with threatening signals, including that the "victim" cannot escape.

Repeating such interactions induces feyness more easily than hypnotizing a chicken. When the appearance of a check point induces immediate, helpless compliance, you're done. Or done for.

Can you see how this same pattern appears in a project context? You and your sponsor connect weekly for a status meeting. The sponsor asks how long

the project will take. (You have not completed defining the project's objectives.) You sense behind the sponsor's question, the judgment that any qualified professional should be able to accurately estimate a project's duration. Something inside you agrees. Responses like, "This isn't retail," feel inappropriate. Refusing to answer might cast you as a waffler, or so whispers the voice inside your head. Catch yourself estimating what you know you don't know as if

you could and did know, and you're fey.

These fey-inducing double binders pass their poison in several ways. Four of the most popular are:

**1) Demanding Spontaneity** ["Next week, I'd like you to better anticipate my questions."];

**2) Prohibiting Reality** ["The project cannot fall behind." - when your guts and your head both know it has!];

**3) Second-guessing Feelings** ["You shouldn't feel disappointed. You've learned something. You should feel encouraged!"];

**4) Demanding While Prohibiting**, ["I want you to update this plan without interrupting the people trying to do real work on this project."].

These damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't double binds disqualify you by invalidating your experiences, just as if words could somehow undo what actually happens! Repeated disqualification encourages the desperation of feyness.

Disqualifying comes in many guises. Sometimes, someone simply evading or changing the subject can leave me feeling disqualified. When their response changes the content of my statement, I can feel disqualified, too. When another holds me strictly to my literal word without considering context or inflection, disqualification looms. Someone using their personal status or "superior knowledge" to imply that my perception is not valid, also disqualifies. Redundant questioning does it, too, by implying doubt or disagreement without ever openly stating it.

My challenge when confronted by these fey-inducers becomes to find some sense of personal power in this seemingly powerless situa-

tion. These doom generators are never more powerful than you are yourself, but their manner of interacting robs you of your sense of power. But losing your sense of power is not the same thing as losing your power.

**"... their manner of interacting robs you of your sense of power. But losing your sense of power is not the same thing as losing your power."**

Feyness is a lure. That sense of powerless desperation lures us into a state that few easily escape. Failure occurs when desperation gets lured into persistence.

**"Failure occurs when desperation gets lured into persistence."**

My antidote? Consciousness. Awareness. Sensitivity! I figure that as long as I'm feeling uncomfortable, as long as I'm awake enough to remember that I can reach up and grab the master's threatening stick rather than submitting to his threat, I'm okay. I'm not fey as long as I'm feeling something besides permanently doomed. My fey avoidance strategy centers around my commitment to not getting comfortable with these inconveniences!

I acknowledge that avoiding feyness requires that I trust rather than stuff my feelings. We each have a very perceptive set of fey sensors, but we too easily fail to use them. For me, trusting feelings is equivalent to trusting the petulant five year-old inside me. My feelings blurt, they burst out without proper deliberation. Still, the ultimate cost of a more fully human project, and of a free society, requires that I listen to this wild child inside me.

The alternative is a police state where we are our own police. das

## Seein' Things

*"I ain't afeard uv snakes, or toads, or bugs, or worms, or mice,*

*An' things 'at girls are skeered uv I think are awful nice!"*

*I'm pretty brave, I guess; an' yet I hate to go to bed,*

*For, when I'm tucked up warm an' snug an' when my prayers are said,*

*Mother tells me "Happy dreams!" and takes away the light,*

*An' leaves me lyin' all alone an' seein' things at night!"*

*-Eugene Field, Poems of Childhood*

## Appreciations



Susan Pecuch for getting us real about Getting Real!

Mark G. Gray for joining this quest.

Mark Lewis for understanding bi-polar feedback.

Dan Starr for writing right.

Rick Gemereth, Jean Veach, Jonathon Story, and Mike Polk for sharing their experiences.

Drs. Robert Ironside and Thomas Rosenbaum for popping my myths!

Amy Schwab for Really Getting Real!

See what's new on our Website: [www.projectcommunity.com/whatsnew.html](http://www.projectcommunity.com/whatsnew.html) for some recommended readings and the latest stuff from True North project guidance strategies, Inc.

You'll learn about Getting Real 2002, Open Enrollment Learnings, Follow-up Sessions, Love and Marriage, New Relationships, and a secret or two. das

## Notices:

If your projects are luring you into feyness, consider enrolling in **True North pgs' Mastering Projects Workshop**. We post open enrollment workshop opportunities on our website. See [www.projectcommunity.com](http://www.projectcommunity.com) for details!

Also, check our **Heretics' Forum**: <http://pc.wiki.net> for the latest insights and conversations about projects and about life.

September 2002 will be the last **Problem Solving Leadership** workshop. See <http://www.geraldweinberg.com> for details. das

## About *Compass*



*Compass* is published periodically by *True North pgs, Inc*, and is distributed free of charge to a project-oriented community.

*Compass* is a navigation tool for continuing your process of improving your project experience. *Compass* shares stories and insights to serve as the basis for you to provide more effective leadership to yourself and to your project's community. We enable each other to improve the quality of our project experiences through sharing our stories and our insights.

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David A. Schmaltz, President

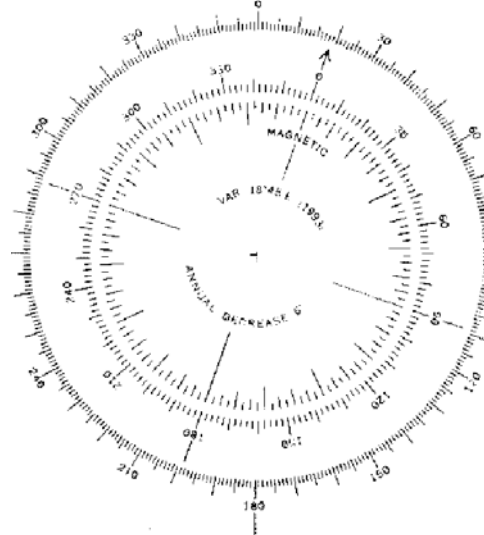
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