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Steps to an Ecology of Fear:  
Advanced Curriculum for  
Fearlessness



R. Michael Fisher, Ph.D.  
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**Technical Paper No. 38**

In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute

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The In Search of Fearlessness Institute is dedicated to research and publishing on fear, fearlessness and emotions in general, as well as critical reviews of such works. Preference is given to works with an integral theoretical perspective.

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# Steps to an Ecology of Fear: Advanced Curriculum for Fearlessness

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**Abstract:** The author outlines a unique integral transdisciplinary theory (model, map) for studying four meta-motivations universal to all living systems. Within this theory are four primary principles to make the whole integral basis for understanding motivation and all that it determines in perception, thinking, feelings, actions. The four meta-motivations are Fear, Love, Freedom and Fearlessness. This work continues the author's 25 year study of recalibrating W. societies' views and approaches to curriculum design which are truly emancipatory, rather than continuing a legacy of fear-based curriculum design and pedagogy that is wiping out the best qualities of the Natural, Cultural and Spiritual worlds. The author argues that the foundational meta-motivation (principle) of Fear is an *ecology of fear* essential to the understanding of the Natural world and thus, also, the world of human beings. Any notion of "living in harmony" with the natural world (*a la* Gregory Bateson and many holistic and indigenous educators) ought to engage the role of an ecology of fear.

## INTRODUCTION

Curriculum advancements in design follow many paths, based on the worldviews and value-biases of the designers and implementers. What you are about to read is my own take on the world and how it ought to be organized around the principle of fearlessness rather than fear. Some humanistic and spiritual educators have long argued that curriculum should be organized around love. I agree in part, but my own postmodern approach has shown that "love is not enough." We require a much more nuanced understanding of the path (and pedagogy) of the life-journey between fear and love, and that path I call fearlessness.

One can easily become skeptical of current curriculum designs in all fields of Education today, and the last few decades. The "conservative" turn has been dominant, especially in the USA, with advances of neo-liberalism. This critique, like many others, of such a turn is not the focus here but is the context for part of why this current work is important. Yet, even my own study of liberal or progressive curriculum designs, and even some of the most radical ones, leaves me unconvinced they truly have an

emancipatory design that will attack the human Fear Problem with significant sustainable success in the 21st century (post-9/11 era).

My own work on the human Fear Problem goes back to the mid-1980s but more specifically to 1989 and the co-founding of the In Search of Fearlessness Project. In Appendix I there are some of the essential writings I've done, as well as recent scholars who are now engaging this work seriously by citing it. However, at this time the curriculum for Fearlessness Movement, as I call it, is hardly well known, and it has been avoided and/or rejected by many who have seen it. Thus, this research work is marginal—some say "too idealistic." I prefer to see it as closer to the "truth" and very realistic but indeed that is not the same "realistic" that most pragmatic people would embrace. Although pragmatism has its place, if it is not emancipatory and truly healing of the wounds and suffering of not only humans but all beings, then it is not fearlessness. Anything less, is more or less, breeding more fear not less (i.e., a cycle of fear, or "culture of fear"). Again, this rationale for my work can be found through reading the resources in Appendix I. There will be no more space in this technical paper given to that general background work.

### **Do We Have a Fear Problem?**

... they would try to understand the forces within themselves which motivate them.... They would overcome the incestuous ties to the past, to where they came from, to family and land, and replace them by a loving and critical concern. They would develop the fearlessness, which only deep-rootedness in oneself, conviction, and a full relatedness to the world can give.  
- Erich Fromm<sup>1</sup>

The 17th century was the century of mathematics,  
The 18th century was of physical sciences,  
And the 19th biology.  
Our 20th century is the century of fear.  
-Albert Camus<sup>2</sup>

Of all the emotional forces that pattern our individual and interpersonal behaviors, fear has the most insidious power to makes us do what we ought not to do and leave undone what we ought to do. Under its influence, and trying to escape its influence, we seem fated to give it a yet stronger hold upon us.... If, today [1951], we live in a time of crisis, it is in large measure because the fear-born follies of our individual and group pasts have piled up in the present. To call a halt to this compounding of folly—or even to slow its progress—we must become clear about some of the reasons why we have not yet made any adequate attack upon our human fear-problem.  
- Bonaro Overstreet<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Fromm (1968/71) p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt (adapted) from a piece in the French underground newspaper *Combat* (1946). Cited in Corradi (1992) p. 167.

These three quotes speak about the things I care about as a researcher-educator and human being. Erich Fromm was speaking of the radical humanist movement he envisioned. Jean-Paul Sartre was speaking of the shadow-side of "progress" in the modern world that instead of leading to less fear, as the promise of progress claimed, it increased fear. And for Bonaro Overstreet, she was convinced that we had as a species not yet tackled the human fear problem and instead were resisting solving it, of which I agree heartily. I have called that resistance *fearism*, as the more subtle problem, the more intransigent and destructive problem underneath the belly of terrorism. Yet, most people don't have any idea of what fearism is. Again, Appendix 1 will give you more articulation on what fearism and the Fear Problem is and how to deal with it, from my view.

### Steps to an Ecology of Fear

The title for this technical paper comes from my exposure to the incredibly brilliant and ahead-of-his-time writing of Gregory Bateson, and a book he wrote entitled *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972). I was in my late twenties and read this work and others by him. They changed my way of thinking, not that I had not thought like he was writing about, but I didn't know how to describe the ways I was thinking already, which could be called "ecological thinking" or "embodied thinking," "process thinking," or "integral thinking." He validated my way of perceiving and thinking of the world, that is, when I was most "in-tune." Yet, more importantly, it is *systems thinking* of the integrated and integral kind that I would say is foundational in Bateson's research and philosophy of knowledge.

The word "ecology" used by Bateson and myself is much more than the strict definition given by the field of biology and ecology. Yet, they are related. I'll begin to introduce some of Bateson's most basic findings and directives to a future world (and a revision of curriculum in Education). I recommend you read his work directly, or others who have taken time to study it and apply it. This will be a bare skeleton of his essential message that I utilize to begin my own work (in progress) on a theory of an "*ecology of fear*" (and Love and fearlessness), as you'll read below. Although the focus of this technical paper is on the natural world and thus natural ecology it cannot be fully detached from a social ecology of fear.

Charlton (2003) summarized Bateson's work:

[His] central insight was that active engagement within aesthetic processes can enable us to see beyond the '*purposive consciousness*' which has led us into ecological peril. (p. 225)

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<sup>3</sup> Overstreet (1951/71), p. 11.

The critique is one I totally embrace as well. "Purposive consciousness" is the mind that is not ecological, embodied or systems-oriented in its thinking and aims, but is short-sighted, egoic-based, and fragmented from the harmony and rules of nature. I also appreciate that Bateson saw a critical role for the aesthetic, sacred, and notions of 'grace.' Reason (2007) wrote,

... traditional forms of teaching, 'more of the same kind of education,' even with different content, will not bring about the change of mind required-- they are necessary but not sufficient.... [we require] Gregory Bateson's (1972) radical arguments about the dangers of conscious rational mind untempered by aesthetics, grace and the sacred. It is argued that these considerations lead to a different kind of educational process which integrates the aesthetic, emotional and spiritual with intellectual understanding. (p. 29)

I won't go into those concepts, but rather point, as Bateson does himself, to a new perception of ourselves and this planetary ecology (evolution of consciousness = Mind) that we are participative with. To have purpose in a Batesonian way, is to have purpose with big Mind, not little egoic-mind and its petty needs and fears leading the way.

To have purpose with the Mind of Nature, if you will, as Bateson would say, is to have purpose with the Purpose of Life itself, with Quality itself. He said, we humans cannot get in-tune with that Purpose as long as we think we are separate (a subject) and nature is all objects. We have to tune-in, he said to the process of Life, and see we are that process too. He argued, and I agree, that a good way to tune-in to that process of Mind is to utilize the arts, aesthetics, and other arational ways of processing beyond mere reason alone. Again, you ought to read Bateson to get the nuances.

My point, is that we have developed as a human species (I speak for the modern Western worldview) a way of thinking that is killing us and a lot of the living systems around us. In my other papers I have written it is because that way of thinking is largely fear-based and toxic. Recently, the advances in cognitive sciences have shared similar insights and have asked us to not overly-inflate that we are as "rational" (and "reasonable") as we think we are as a unique species.

No more poignantly has this challenge to the *rational myth* been elaborated because of how our brain-mind system is wired evolutionarily for arationality (if not irrationality at times). Foundationally, cognitive researchers claim that most (90+%) of our thinking is unconscious, that is, below rational thought. We are motivated, as is most of our thinking, in other words, by powerful forces-- which is where my model of the *ecology of fear* comes in as a meta-motivational integral theory. But let's not rush ahead there. Varela et al. (1992), have developed one of the most powerful

arguments from cognitive sciences, with their theory of enactivism, and consciousness, that the critique of purposive conscious rational thought is indeed true. But worse, they point out that it is fear-based, by which they devote a section of their book to the modern mind's evolution and particularly in the Western world-- they call that thinking based on "Cartesian anxiety" (or fear, by any other name). Again, you can read their work directly if you like.

This technical paper is all about the motivation, the designs of it, its evolution and ecology, and how that influences us today. If we are building curriculum to adapt to the future, we ought to know what we are adapted for biologically and how that works now, and its origins in the past. Thus, I have been doing a lot of research on primate ancestors and the evolution of mammalian life-strategies as well. The model I'll go through in basic form below is an arising gesture of depicting what I have been reading for years and especially in the last six months. It's a sketch only-- a few steps on the way to better understanding human's most basic motivations (or meta-motivations, as I think is more accurate).

If you study the topic "fear" you soon come across a fascinating philosophical, psychological and spiritual (religious) literature that says there are only two great emotions (or motivators) of human kind: Love and Fear. They also claim they are opposites, where you can't be in one of those motivational forces and also in the other; they are mutually exclusive. The ethics of these discussions, which are quite universal, suggest that we as a species have to move (grow up) from Fear to Love, because in the end *Love is greater than Fear* (so they claim). And Love will produce a world we want to live in and Fear will destroy us and Love. Yet, Love can destroy Fear. The faith system behind these writings is another story, and I address it (see Appendix 1) in part, yet my latest model below is the best thinking I've done on this problematic of how to get from Fear to Love-- and the story doesn't end there. I basically argue, that if we don't get the foundational psychotropic level 1 right, which I call Fear (reality-principle), then all the psychotropic levels 2, and 3 about it will be faulty too.

So, let's begin with some diagrams, complex at first glance, and then I offer a more simplified version with descriptions to help you negotiate and navigate the more complex diagrams. Of course, it would take a book to write in all the details and arguments for understanding these diagrams (maps). Also, I am well aware the real territory of Life and experience is not a map and cannot be adequately captured in a map. Yet, I like maps to get my thinking going, and re-imagine new possible sets of relationships. So, I believe these maps will help us re-imagine our motivations, which are deeply embedded in millions of years of evolutionary history and ecological principles. They depict a sacred hierarchical (or holarchical) order that is

sacred and needs to be attended to. Let's start the story with Figure 1 and the moral hierarchy of meta-motivations.

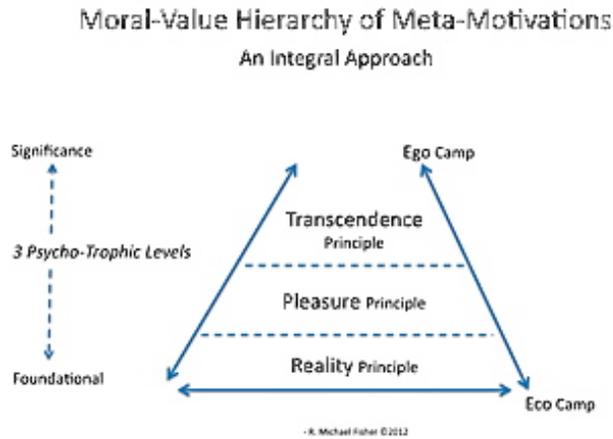


Figure 1 Meta-Motivations: Moral Hierarchy

The pyramid structure gives the clue that the foundational motivations of life are on the bottom, the most primal evolutionarily and developmentally. They form the structure for all the above that emerge (evolve) from it. I won't go into discussion of the 3 principles per se in this short technical paper, but in Figure 2 you'll see their relationship to more common terms. The Ego and Eco Camp is taken from Wilber (1995) and again it is beyond our scope to discuss those views. The levels are called psycho-trophic because they involve psychic and energetic trophic levels in a 'food chain' if you will in ecology but there is a more subtle arrangement and dynamic than in purely physical food chains in ecological theory.

**Moral-Value Hierarchy of Meta-Motivations**  
 TOWARD An Integral THEORY OF LOVE-FEAR ECOLOGY



Figure 3, in its simplest form taken from Figure 1 and 2, is a map depicting what I envision as a theory of meta-motivation that is universal for humans, and likely for many creatures from birds, mammals, and especially primates.

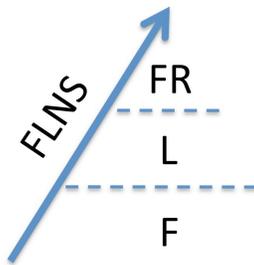


Figure 3 FOUR META-MOTIVATIONAL PRINCIPLES

KEY: F = FEAR, L = Love, FR = FREEDOM, FLNS = FEARLESSNESS

There are four grand principles that motivate humans. They have many sub-motivational forces within each of them, which I won't go into here in any detail. The pyramid shape shows the F, L, FR are in a hierarchy relationship with the most foundational principle being Fear (F) and the most significant principle being Love (L). Although, this integral model would argue that they are all co-arising (latent), they are also developmentally related. That is, until the ground floor level (foundation) is developed, intact, and healthy, only then will LOVE (L) emerge and differentiate into its complexities as a meta-motivator that is also intact, healthy. Then with L intact, it provides a foundation for FREEDOM (FR) as a meta-motivator that is healthy. The sense that the "lower" (foundational) comes before and is

wider than those above it (i.e., the "higher") is based on the integral theory of Ken Wilber,<sup>4</sup> which I utilize and will not try to explain here in order to keep this brief.

### **Principle of Fear and Fearlessness**

In short, the *Principle of Fear* refers approximately to the *reality-principle*, similar to Freud's notion, of a "struggle for existence" or survival instinct,<sup>5</sup> which comes as top priority in evolution before reproduction or the pleasure-principle. I call it the *Defense System* (realities of survival).<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is really important to understand Fear well before Love, if you want to work with (be in harmony with) the great forces of meta-motivation driving Creation, or at least human creations. However, it is really important we remember these meta-motivational forces and psycho-trophic levels are highly interrelated and interdependent at the same time, forming their own "ecology" of sorts. Yet, there is a developmental, priority, hierarchy or holarchy in their design. At least, that is the argument based on my studies of evolutionary theory and ecology. Again, I won't go into all those arguments as it would be way beyond the scope of this brief skeleton paper.

So Figure 4 is about the components of the Defense System and realities of survival of living organisms. It is my first sketch of the major components of the foundational psycho-trophic level.

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<sup>4</sup> See the rather complex evolutionary rationale for a healthy hierarchy of development (not a pathological one), for example, in Wilber (1995).

<sup>5</sup> Following Brown's (1959) interpretation, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> See Fisher (2010).

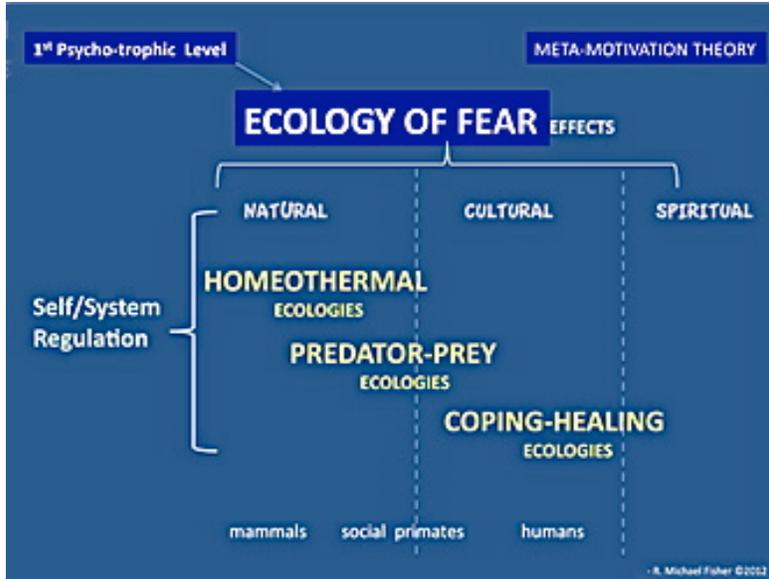


Figure 4 Ecology of Fear Components

You'll notice in Figure 4 I call the components parts of a self-regulating system. That means that any living organism is under pressures from the environment and its changes, that affect interior changes and *visa versa* (to a lesser degree). The ecological system of organism-environment (which the latter includes also other organisms) is complex and as ecologists tell us is ultimately an exchange of energies on different trophic levels. The most explicit example of that is predator-prey relations (i.e., a food chain dynamic, which are always pyramidal).

I'll only pursue here, ever so briefly the middle self-regulating system of "Predator-Prey Ecologies." There is a little background that is worth mentioning to where I came to see this predator-prey relationship as important. In the past 10 years ecologists and evolutionary ethologists (those that study wild animal behavior especially) have struck up a theoretical dialogue and studies that examine what they have called "landscape of fear" (e.g., Laundre et al., 2010) and "ecology of fear" (e.g., Ripple and Beschta, 2004)-- whereby, their interest is to record the impacts, positive and negative, in ecosystems, based on the predator-prey relations in an environment or landscape. They are saying that "fear" in prey animals affects their behavior and inner physiological dynamics greatly and even influences the behavior of other animals around them, as well as it significantly influences growth and reproduction of plant populations and soil conditions, etc. In other words, all trophic levels are more or less affected by the dynamics (fear) of predator-prey relationships. Some of these scien-

tists are arguing that "fear" is far more important in influencing these ecological systems than was previously thought, prior to 10 years ago.

I found this fascinating as a parallel coming from the scientific community and their studies in natural systems. My own work, which focused on the affects and effects of fear in cultural systems (humans) was part of a growing interest (especially since the mid-90s) of the great impact of fear on human's and their human ecology or social ecology. Many critics were writing about the human fear problem, across disciplines, but it is only now we see the parallel and foundational arguments being made in the natural sciences. I think that connection needs to be looked at. That's what this technical paper points toward, even if it does not ferret out all the nuances of this problem. Point is, we now have evidence of the critical importance of "fear" in ecological systems, non-human and human. That's my whole point. How can curriculum designers, or anyone else who organizes human societies and manages them ignore these findings? Well, if they do so, they put us all at great risk.

Another way to understand the ecology of fear, is brought out in one of the scientific papers with the question "Can Predation Risk Structure Ecosystems?" and to what extent can it do that (Ripple and Beschta). There has been a growing surge of Risk Studies as well in the social sciences, with great implications to politics and cultural patterns. Risk studies involve how fear and perception of risk motivate human behavior and create predictable regimes of responses and ways of thinking that put "safety and security" first before higher order levels on the psycho-trophic map.

I think this gives you lots to play with and read further into as a start to a new meta-motivational map, and a theory that looks at what an ecology of fear may be in humans. Predator-prey relations from the natural world can teach us lots about our human world relations. When I read books on "predatory capitalism" and on criminals as "predators," you know that these terms and ideas of *who is preying on who* are important to human beings.

A few words on the Fear Principle and Fearlessness Principle. Looking at the evolutionary design and trajectory of meta-motivations for survival (and beyond survival), there is the basic *Fear Principle* which is the Defense Principle (by another name)<sup>7</sup>. That is, the Fear Principle exists as the way to guide survival, and optimal energy budget in order to eventually reproduce and raise healthy offspring and pass on the genetic code to the

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<sup>7</sup> All along in my 25 yrs of research on this topic, I have been reluctant to call this the Fear Principle, as I think the term "fear" is so massive distorted, projected, and pathologically-situated in the Cultural domain, that it is dubious as to how accurately it can assess and describe the Natural domain. It's a huge epistemological problem. My earlier writings go into the technicalities, too tedious for this technical paper.

next generation. The Fear Principle has "rules" and "regulations" (codes) we have to learn to read very finely and critically. We particularly need to understand those codes in the Natural realm before the Cultural realm manipulated them (and in some cases re-wrote them). That's a long argument. The *Fearlessness Principle* is basically this (in a nutshell): *when fear arises, so then does fearlessness*. Fearlessness (as complex as it is in development and levels of its own line of evolution) is a fear management mechanism (function, structure). In Figures 1, 2, 3, you see that "Fearlessness" is the *telos* or designed direction of the entire ecologies. It parallels the evolution of consciousness (a la Ken Wilber and my own theory).

### Closing Remarks

Today, we are seen as a "top predator" as a species on this planet. But we weren't always, and in fact most of our evolution shows that we were "prey" for other predators for long periods of our development as a species. There are still creatures that prey upon us (e.g., mosquitoes). We often don't think of these. Thus, *fear of predation*, lethal and non-lethal, is critical to how our brain-mind-body is designed. Our behavioral strategies for survival affect predation and victimization. That's why the critical study of the *ecology of fear* (FEAR, as psycho-trophic level 1), is greatly needed to be applied to humans.

There is lots of information on fear in humans, like from neurobiology and natural and social sciences, from philosophy and spirituality (religions) etc., but little has there been integration of that knowledge and thus, a lack of synthesis and integral new theories. My work is aimed to meeting that 'gap' in synthesis. Educators, among others, cannot ignore this need, or if they do, I suggest it will be at our species peril, as the whole ecological balance of the planet is arguably in deep crisis. We need to understand what humans are designed for in terms of these meta-motivational forces in the Figures above. The more interesting implications is that our understanding of the meta-motivations of Love and Freedom are directly determined (but not entirely) by our understanding of Fear, in terms of the total ecology of motivation.

I leave you with this skeleton of ideas and now we need to test the theory as well as re-work it and fill-in the details. I look forward to further conversations with anyone interested in this work and its implications. I encourage readers to check out the Museum of Fearology (which I co-founded) as an upcoming exhibit is entitled "Ecology and Geography of Fear."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Co-founded with Trevor Malkinson, at *Beams and Struts* ezine ([www.beamsandstruts.com](http://www.beamsandstruts.com))

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## APPENDIX 1

The latest work summarizing my thinking on a critical pedagogy is:

Fisher, R. M. (2011). A critique of critical thinking: Towards a critical pedagogy of fearlessness. *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry*, 9(2), 92-164.

The most substantial summary of my work is in the following book:

Fisher, R. M. (2010). *The world's fearlessness teachings: A critical integral approach to fear management/education for the 21st century*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

For substantial research, courses offered, and background on my work go to: <http://csiie.org/mod/page/view.php?id=3>  
 - for older archives: <http://www.feareducation.com>  
 - for current consulting: <http://loveandfearsolutions.com>

### **Scholars Who Have Cited the Importance of My Work**

#### **Progressive Theology**

[**Book review** of *The World's Fearlessness Teachings*, 2010; on Amazon.co.uk]

"I really enjoyed this and was challenged, stimulated, and excited by what I read. It's a very serious book - and isn't easy reading. Nor is its message for the faint-hearted. But I do believe that this book represents a very important contribution to the creation of a more secure future for humanity.

Not only does Fisher manage to communicate a vast amount of knowledge about the way 'fear' has come almost imperceptibly to dominate much of our thinking, self-identity, cultural awareness and political interaction, but he takes us a long way on the journey towards re-imagining what a world without fear might look like.

It seems to me that anyone who is concerned about the future of the planet and of the human race needs to buy and read this - and then begin creating opportunities to make his teaching their own.

Thank you for the message Michael!"

-Revd Dr Terry Biddington  
 Co-ordinating Chaplain at St Peter's House for Chaplaincy Services to the Manchester Higher Education Community: Manchester University, Manchester Metropolitan University, the Royal Northern College of Music.

### **Social Work/Human Services**

"Dr. Fisher is an involved communicator, who can explain complicated and abstract concepts across diverse audiences, while connecting with them at both cognitive and emotional levels. His communication style uses both physical and visual spaces at the optimum. He is very well-read on eclectic subjects and an authority on Integral theory, which he explicates with vivid personal as well as practical experience. He is a great teacher, counselor and an invaluable resource to our community that I, along with my students, have been benefitted to have."

- Dr. Dhru Mukherjee, Assoc. Prof. and Graduate Program Director,  
School of Social Work, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

### **Communication/Performance Studies/Critical Pedagogy**

"I came across your work while I was researching critical pedagogy.... I've done just a little work with the "culture of fear" but I think your work is absolutely fascinating and extremely important in so many fields at this current nexus of fear mongering (It particularly makes me think about the rise of hate groups in the last ten years). Anyway, thank you so much for your work."

-Christopher C. Collins  
Department of Communication, Mass Media, and Theatre  
Angelo State University, Texas Tech University System  
ASU Station# 10895  
San Angelo, Texas 76909-0895

Collins, C. (2012). *Body, paper, stage: A lens for performance studies pedagogy*. Paper presented at The Eighth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana.

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