Fear of Change
By Henry Ford
1922

Henry Ford (1863-1947) is most famous for founding the Ford Motor Company and developing the assembly line, which is essential to mass production. “Fear of Change” is an excerpt from Ford’s longer work entitled Ford Ideals. In “Fear of Change,” Ford examines why change is necessary and why some people respond to it negatively. As you read, find take notes on Ford’s tone and the strength of his rhetoric in his article.

Voices on every side are counseling us to fill ourselves with fear. Wherever you go, whatever you read, the tones of calamity are strongly emphasized. The proper aftermath of war does not seem to be a sense of relief at all, nor a spirit of gratitude for the deliverance, nor yet a hopeful view of the future. Our loudest advisers would have us believe that the only proper feeling is one of dread for the dire events that are expected to follow.

All this is very strange when you stop to consider it, because it is not so many months ago when anyone who forecasted the future in other than rosy hues was denounced as a “calamity howler.”

Today, however, Jeremiah¹ is chief among the prophets.

And when this occurs, it is a sign.

No stronger sign could be given that something has been wrong and still is wrong in America than the readiness of a certain class to accept this counsel of fear.

The man whom you can reduce to a state of fear by threats of retribution,² is not reduced to such a state by your words, but by the corroboration³ of a guilty conscience within him.

One is justified by human experience in gauging the degree of guilt by the readiness of the fear. When a spokesman arises and says, “Yes, we have a great deal of fear,” it is probably true that he and those he represents really have much to fear. But it does not follow that everyone has.

¹ A Hebrew prophet, who was said to have been beaten by his own brothers, thrown into prison, questioned, and threatened with death.
² Retribution (noun): punishment
³ Corroborate (verb): to confirm or give support to a theory
Those whose conscience is clear, who know that they have done their duty and have not denied their obligations to humanity, who have not thought themselves better or more deserving than their fellow-creatures—these do not have to take refuge in fears. They are free to scan the future and to greet whatever it may have in store.

The accusing conscience, the life that knows it has ignored the rights of others, is Fear's ally.

Well, what about the mysterious future? What are its portents? What is the outlook? False prophets always prophesy peace, and the reason their prophecy is false is that there never is peace in the way they mean it.

So, if this page were to begin on the note of “Peace, peace,” you could at once set it down as false. As long as there is life there is Change. The peace of stagnation is an attribute of death.

That, therefore, is one element we may expect in the future—the element of Change.

Whatever we may regret about it, the old world as we knew it can never come back. It can never be the same again. Even if every human being on the globe devoted himself to reconstructing the old world as it was, it could not be done.

And the reason for this is that we ourselves have changed. We are not what we were. We can never be the same again. Something has passed over us and upon us that has rendered us different. We have changed our angle of view. That which formerly seem all-important now occupies a lower place, and that of which we seldom thought has been made the chief interest of life. The world has really been turned upside down as far as its thinking is concerned.

Of course, this is nothing new. It has always happened, though not always so suddenly and inclusively as it has happened now. We are continually changing and life is always changing for us and the world is changing beneath and around us—so why fear Change?

And yet there are people who really do fear it. These are the people who are falling victims to the propaganda of Fear today.

To shrink from a new situation is, in ordinary time, a sign of weakness. When a man feels that he is afraid to tackle anything out of the ordinary routine, when circumstance throws an obstruction in his way and it cows him instead of rousing him, then he has lost his zest for real life.

Life is just one unexpected thing after another, and if a man fails to appreciate the glory of the unexpected, his pulse is slowing up. It is Change that keeps men alive, just as it is the flow that keeps water pure.

But aside from the fear which is a sign of weakness, there is another fear which is a sign of selfishness. It is that fear which has clutched a whole class in America today.

We have been pretty calm and easy-going in America. We have left a great many leaks which shrewd men use to exploit for their personal gain. We have unregulated power which unscrupulous men use to entrench themselves at the expense of other.
And the whole posse of get-rich-quick thieves, and the whole class of those who fatten on the productive thought and labor of others, are the ones who fear the specter of Change as it were an accusing spirit.

And in their case impending Change is an accusing spirit. For what can be changed to anyone's hurt is wrong to begin with. The right system cannot be changed. Even an improvement of the right system injures no one, but helps all. But if Change strikes the grafts of the idle rich class and hurts them, it is a proof that their system is wrong and harmful to others.

Anyone who has been living by his productive thought and labor, who has been mindful to bring his fellow-men along with him, who has never thought in terms of his own wealth and glory but always in terms of the general good and prosperity, such a one has nothing to fear from Change. He usually foresees it meets it half way. It is his friend and ally.

Why should it be so hard to get this thought into men's mind, that Change can only hit those matters which ought to be changed for the better?

If our rich idlers are made to work for their bread and contribute something beside their ornamental presence to general good, will that be a disastrous change?

If those who live by dickering instead of by laboring are made to get down to business and earn their living, will that be a change to be feared?

If the whole mass of human spiders, financial, professional and social, are hindered from spinning their webs to catch hard-working human flies and their earning, is that a change to be dreaded?

Of the dishonest, shrewd, scheming, gambling, double-crossing tribe of shirkers are put out of their feathered nests and made to pay their labor for their living, will such a thing “the end civilization” as some of the fear-peddlers tell us?

Instead of bringing “the end of civilization,” they will constitute a very promising beginning along sadly neglected lines.

It is a pretty safe method to follow, when you hear a man raving about the danger there is to Civilization at the present moment, to ask him, “Which of your grafts is in danger?”

You don't see people who do their daily work honestly and well going about and spreading this fear.

You don't hear of the farmers calling mass-meetings and warning each other to look out, that something is going to happen!

Why? Because these people are doing their duty to mankind. They are producing their living. They are not living off other people. Their conscience doesn't accuse them. This is very significant. It is so significant that you had better consider it a moment. The fear-peddlers of the present hour are the privileged class, the big grafter class, and its servant--and these servants are the reactionary politicians, and the newspapers which seem to believe that all Change and improvements is of the devil.
Observe and see if this is not true. Watch the “voices of warning” and see if they do not issue from those classes where the Guilty Conscience would naturally become most active in times of threatened Change.

Surveying the disorder in Europe, its cause would appear to be the determination of the privileged classes that the world shall go on in the old way, and the utter impossibility of the world going on in the old way. For we must remember that when kings were dethroned, Private Privilege was not dethroned. Kingship was always built upon the foundation of class privilege, and it was possible for the head to abdicate without breaking up the system. Kinds were useful to private privilege because they helped keep the people's respect for high graft. But Privilege can get along without kings if it can only control the people by other means. Here in the United States we have never had a king, yet we have a privileged aristocracy which can be as sharply defined as the nobility of England or the Junkers of Germany.

So, unless these privileged classes of yesterday can start again on yesterday's plan, they will not start at all, and that is at the bottom of the disorder of Europe. They are trying to hold back the tide of progress, which is impossible.

Europe has been the scene of endless war simply because it has distrusted and feared Change.

The danger of Europe today is not that Progress is knocking at her door, but that she will dear to open the door, and will come to her senses only when the door is broken down. Progress will pass, even though it must batter down the barricades of selfishness and prejudice. But it would rather pass peacefully through the doorways of those who trust and welcome it.

Two thousand years of civilization have not taught certain parts of Europe the primary lesson that no nation or system is stronger than the strength and privilege of its humblest member.

Things were coming to an end in Europe even if the war has not intervened. When men deliberately invent a philosophy, print it in books and teach it in schools, which pretends to prove that certain classes are the destined slaves of other classes, the question of privilege being a matter of caste or birth, it was significant that the end was near. For no sooner do you formulate an erroneous philosophy than you inform the world where to strike, and it strikes.

The teaching that any class is good enough to rule another class is the old theory of the divine right of kings revamped and applied to a privileged aristocracy.

Who is so foolish as to believe that the people of Europe, having rid themselves of autocrats, are going to turn around and submit to the same misuse from aristocrats?

“But,” say some of those aristocrats with an expression that would be comical were it not so pitiable, “But, if this new thing comes, then privileges and my vast wealth and lands disappear!”

And why not? Why should not land be put to productive use? Why should not wealth minister to the good of all the people instead of the luxurious tastes of the few?

The land cannot be destroyed, neither can the wealth. It is just a taking of the useless thing and making it useful. Surely that is civilized and right!
There are two evils we want to abolish from our world: one of them is Poverty, the other is Privilege. No, how can we abolish Poverty? You do not accomplish it by destroying the poor. You accomplish it by destroying the causes of Poverty.

Then how can we abolish Privilege? You do not do it by standing the privileged class against stone walls. You accomplish it by abolishing the causes of Privilege. Privilege has just as definite causes as Poverty, and they are just as easily controlled—just as easily.

No one will be hurt in the good Changes that may be in store for this world. Not at all.

Even the idle nobleman who loses his luxury is not going to be hurt—he will be a better man without his idleness, his useless luxury and his expensive vices.

They say that some of the princes of Europe are going into business, becoming clerks and salesmen and farmers. Well, have they been harmed? Not at all. They are more princely now than they ever were with the baubles of rank dangling from their narrow chests. Get the gambling aristocrats and the selfish capitalists to work for a year, and they would never go back to the old life. They will come round and thank the influences that made them get out and hustle and become of some use.

If the poor will thank you for abolishing Poverty, the useless rich will thank you for abolishing Privilege.

Because a good Change works good all around.

That is why a man with a clear conscience need never fear a Progressive Change. If he is a worker now, he will be needed in the world whatever happens.

Nothing will ever happen that will dethrone the worker. He is the one class who place is secure throughout all time. The man who produces by his thought or his labor will always be in request and in favor. He constitutes the continuing class—he is the hold-over through every change.

That is why the workers are not afraid.

If a moral were needed, this might do: to escape fear and a guilty conscience, become a worker. And this applies very directly to the wealthy idler whose fears are very lively just now.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. **PART A**: Which of the following best summarizes a central idea of the text? [RI.2]
   A. One cannot truly live if one fears the future and resists change.
   B. Any hope for peace is unattainable and thus cause for fear.
   C. Anyone who is afraid is guilty of some form or sort of crime.
   D. America differs from Europe because it has never had a ruling class that feared change.

2. **PART B**: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “One is justified by human experience in gauging the degree of guilt by the readiness of the fear.” (Paragraph 7)
   B. “False prophets always prophesy peace, and the reason their prophecy is false is that there never is peace in the way they mean it.” (Paragraph 10)
   C. “Life is just one unexpected thing after another, and if a man fails to appreciate the glory of the unexpected, his pulse is slowing up.” (Paragraph 18)
   D. “Here in the United States we have never had a king, yet we have a privileged aristocracy which can be as sharply defined as the nobility of England or the Junkers of Germany.” (Paragraph 35)

3. **PART A**: Which of the following best describes the tone of the passage? [RI.4]
   A. Angry, because Ford resents lazy workers
   B. Idealistic, because Ford has high (somewhat unrealistic) hopes
   C. Indifferent, because as a success Ford has no interest in the workers’ cause
   D. Sarcastic, because Ford despises the rich upper class

4. **PART B**: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to PART A? [RI.1]
   A. “If the whole mass of human spiders, financial, professional and social, are hindered from spinning their webs to catch hard-working human flies and their earning, is that a change to be dreaded?” (Paragraph 27)
   B. “But,” say some of those aristocrats with an expression that would be comical were it not so pitiable, “But, if this new thing comes, then privileges and my vast wealth and lands disappear!” (Paragraph 43)
   C. “Because a good Change works good all around.” (Paragraph 52)
   D. “If a moral were needed, this might do: to escape fear and a guilty conscience, become a worker. And this applies very directly to the wealthy idler whose fears are very lively just now.” (Paragraph 56)
5. What are the two evils in the world, according to Ford, that must be abolished? In your answer, analyze Ford's plans to end these evils—to what extent has he planned this abolition?
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Do you think hard work is necessary for change? Why or why not?

2. The speaker makes strong statements about poverty and privilege. Do you agree with the following statement? “If the poor will thank you for abolishing Poverty, the useless rich will thank you for abolishing Privilege.” Why or why not?

3. The speaker states that change keeps men alive. Do you think that change is a necessary part of life? Why or why not?

4. In the context of this text, why do you think people resist change? How do you think people responded to the innovations of the Model T and the assembly line? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.