

Towson Unitarian Universalist Church  
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*Fear*

I was reminded of Anna Quindlen's experience responding to the monster under her son's bed as I listened to a parent this fall. He described how the bedtime ritual of one of his children has become more lengthy and light-filled. The problem is not as concrete as a monster under the bed. Instead, his child speaks of the fear of a stranger coming into the house in the dark and harming family members; of the fear of being kidnapped; of the fear of going to school; of the fear of the death of one of his parents. The form fear takes changes shape night to night but the experience of being gripped by its power does not. And so the child talks, the parent listens, and the room stays brightly lit.

Hearing this story of that stage of growing up where fear is a nightly visitor, I was reminded of a session of Small Group Ministry with colleagues. One of the questions was about one's first memory of being conscious that the world is not always a trustworthy or safe place. For one it was a newsreel depicting the horrors of Auschwitz; for another it was the image of police siccing barking dogs and blasting people with water during a civil rights protest. For one it was "the Communists" and "the Russians;" for another it was the image of a nuclear mushroom cloud. For one it was a sibling going off in uniform to Korea; for another it was a neighbor's son returning from Vietnam in a body bag.

All could remember an event when they were first conscious that the world is not always a safe or trustworthy place: could remember that moment when they realized that there were some things the adults they depended upon could NOT do to make everything all right. For me, it was the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. I remember asking my mother why these men had been killed. I remember her answer, "I don't know. Sometimes people do bad things." Her answer was honest, but not very comforting. Much more reassuring was being hugged by her as she spoke in the safety of our brightly lit living room. All of us go through the process of having to learn or discover "things that are there – and things you only think are there and their relative dangers and merits."

Fear, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. When it moves us to get out of the way of a speeding car; or to get the carbon dioxide and smoke alarms for our homes; or to get to the doctor's office to check a lump that doesn't belong in a particular body part; or to get ourselves to visit a loved one who is dying, fear can actually get us out of harm's way, get us to take better care of ourselves, get us to pay attention to what is most important.

But when fear becomes a force that controls our lives, that keeps us up at night, that keeps us imagining the worst possible case scenario, that keeps us from getting out of bed, that keeps us from reaching out to others, that keeps us from seeking new experiences, that keeps us in its grip, then fear harms us rather than keeping us out of harm's way.

Shirley Kaufman describes such fear in the following poem entitled, *Meatballs*:

*After dinner we talk about nuclear war, holes in the ozone.  
Small cups of coffee.  
Earnest and passionate.*

*At six in the morning, the lights of the village are like the last cinders.  
The sky and the lake are one black hole in which the rain keeps falling.  
I stand at the window and count my fears.  
They come so fast I can barely name them.  
I barely have time to feel their weight.*

*There are nine, ten, no twelve fears before I get to nuclear war.  
I can't do a thing about any of them.  
All day I watch the rain's thin curtain as the sky and the lake turn gray again.  
I count my fears.  
I make them the size of small meatballs.  
I put them on toothpicks.  
What else can you do with fears?*

*By evening there are more meatballs than lights in the village.  
And after dinner we're at it again.  
Over the coffee.  
Earnest and passionate.  
At six in the morning, the lights shine, the sky is black, the lake is black, and the rain is still raining.  
I stand at the window.  
I count the lights.*

Most of us know something about fears coming so fast we can barely name them. All one has to do is turn on the nightly news to cover nine, ten, twelve fears before getting to nuclear war: genocide in Darfur; terrorists blowing up children in a school in Russia; hurricanes wiping out villages, towns, and communities; beheadings and war in Iraq; a shortage of flu vaccine; the treat of a volcanic eruption; suicide bombs in Egypt; new wonder drugs being found to increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes; a tour bus wreck; an anemic rate of job growth in America – I'm sure you can add your own!

The fall issue of the Unitarian Universalist Association's magazine, *The World*, discussed how fear is being used by both political candidates – to promise

security from terrorism, security from catastrophic medical bills, job security, and secure democracies around the globe. This culture of fear reinforces that the world is not always a trustworthy and safe place. And this message plays into our own personal fears be they of losing our health, our jobs, our home, our loved ones.

What makes fear a theological issue? The 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich explored how every one of us has to learn to live with the truth that we are vulnerable and fragile beings. Our lives are not eternal. The lives of those we love are not eternal. More often than we would like to admit – because we are not all-knowing, all-powerful, and immortal – we are powerless to make everything come out right. In a recent series of sermons on fear, The Reverend Forrest Church summed up what makes fear a religious issue and not just a psychological issue in these words: "Insecurity tells us that we are inadequate; guilt, that we are flawed; worry, that bad things could happen to us; dread, that we have no control over our existence or our fate."

So what is the antidote to fears both large and small? If we're lucky, like Shirley Kaufman, we are able to name our fears. I'm sure the child and his father do not feel lucky when engaged in such dialogue, anymore than Anna Quindlen did with her son. And yet it is by recognizing fear that we can mold it into something we can manage – like meatballs on toothpicks – rather than being controlled and molded by it. Identifying fear is preferable to being unconscious of its role in one's life.

Years ago, psychologists conducted experiments with rats and discovered two natural unconscious responses to fear: the first was flight – to run away from the perceived danger; the other was fight – to stay and battle the perceived danger. When we humans are afraid, and especially when what we are afraid of is losing something precious in our lives – be it physical safety, emotional security, or spiritual meaning – we often unconsciously distance ourselves from the perceived threat or react with anger. Suffice it to say, this can wreak havoc on our relationships.

I'm grateful to my husband Tom for teaching me, when I'm really angry, the real question is not "What are you angry about?" The real question is, "What are you afraid of?" Generally when we are angry we are not aware that we are in "flight or fight" mode. We rationalize our anger by saying that we are righteously angry over some perceived injustice or because someone has done us wrong. But often what's really going on is that we're afraid of something, and we are acting out of fear.

Part of spiritual growth is to stop and think when we're angry, "What am I feeling?" More often than not, the answer is not anger. Anger is not an emotion but rather a reaction to an emotion. The trick is to figure out which emotion one is feeling. Often the emotion is "fear." I commend this exercise to you. The next

time you find yourself really angry, ask yourself what you're afraid of. You may be surprised how the question, itself, releases you from fear's tight grip and helps you and those closest to you to turn back to counting lights.

Of course, it's even more preferable to identify one's fears before finding oneself reacting out of anger. I remember a class in which Christopher Columbus was held up as a model of one who was well acquainted with the fear of falling off the earth but chose, instead, the hope of discovery; of one who could have stayed safe on shore, but who chose to risk all to journey over the seas; of one whose vision and courage and choices inspired others to follow him. We know more, now, about the cost that was paid as a result by the Native American community. Someone told me that at the recent opening of the Native American museum, bumper stickers were available that read, "We began providing Homeland security in 1492." Now that takes our current cultural fear and puts it in perspective!

But it is true that we are all capable of choosing hope over fear, of letting life live through us. So I also commend to you Harry Schofield's spiritual practice of intentionally greeting the day with hope rather than fear. We do choose our stance: to open the blinds and welcome the day or move in darkness, muttering; to turn on the television with its messages of doom and gloom or to focus on the beauty of nature or words of inspiration; to greet others in the household with a smile or to immediately begin a litany of what they "should" do. We have the choice. Laurel Hallman responded to Harry Schofield that she adapted his practice of welcoming the day to take time to intentionally name her fears for any particular day.

The first antidote to fear is recognizing it and correctly identifying it. Sigmund Freud told the story of a three-year-old boy who called out from his dark room, "Auntie, speak to me! I'm frightened because it's so dark." His aunt answered, "What good would that do? You can't see me in the dark." "That doesn't matter," replied the child, "If anyone speaks, it gets light." "Thus," concluded Freud, "What the boy was afraid of was not the dark, but the absence of someone he loved." We all need experiences of the wondrous love that takes away the pain of our souls.

The second antidote to fear is turning to or reaching out to someone we trust to talk through our fears. In so doing we free ourselves from fear's isolating and alienating power. In so doing, we reshape the terrifying monster into meatballs on toothpicks. In so doing, we get in touch with the sources of our courage.

I was reminded of the importance of this a week-and-a-half after September 11th, 2001. My brother had run into Dr. Barnwell, the composer of one of today's choral anthems, and a friend of his, on the streets of Georgetown. He invited her to join my family for dinner. I do not remember the conversation addressing fear, directly. I do remember talking about how the events of September 11th could

be used to justify hatred and intolerance. I do remember talking about how meeting violence with violence might be framed by some as an act of courage. And I do remember talking about our concern that these acts of terrorism would keep us, as Americans, from reaching out to people who are different. Dr. Barnwell shared how Sweet Honey in the Rock had an upcoming concert. What music would they choose to speak to the events of September 11th? My brother attended that concert and learned the answer – “Would You Harbor Me?”

We are all afraid. But we need not be afraid alone. We come to this place seeking hope. We come to this place to name our fears and to have our fears heard. We come to this place knowing that when we cannot make the world safer or more trustworthy, we can keep the chalice burning brightly and offer a hug. We come to this place to be reminded that rather than flee or fight we have the choice to stay and love. We come to this place to promise to receive that wondrous love that takes away the pain in our souls and to be that wondrous love for others. We come to this place to promise to harbor all those people that our culture teaches us to fear for all the wrong reasons. "What else can we do with our fears?" asks Shirley Kaufman?

May we help one another and all those seeking light and courage in the midst of darkness and fear to keep counting the lights and thereby let life live through us.