

Sermon

Fear Itself

Rev. Julia Older

“Look to this day:
For it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course
Lie all the verities and realities of your existence.
The bliss of growth,
The glory of action,
The splendor of achievement
Are but experiences of time.
For yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision;
Today well-lived, makes
Yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well therefore to this day.

ΩΩΩΩΩΩ

That is a poem from our hymnal by Sanskrit poet Kalidasa written about 500CE. If we could live like that, there would be no need for sermons about fear. If we could face everything without drawing back, without avoidance, and without grasping, who knows how much better our lives would be?

The idea for this sermon came from a book I looked at last summer: The Science of Fear by David Garner. Here was his opening idea: “What we can easily imagine is far more weighty than what we can’t.” I know that to be true for me. If I can run a story in my head and make it vivid, I can really get caught up and anxious even if the likelihood of that something actually happening is small.

Gardner said that if we like the idea of something, we judge the risks to be lower. We don't simply make a decision to minimize risks, our auto pilot tells us to believe the risks are smaller. We have to have hard numbers to really be pulled off that course. And most of us like and respond to stories much more than to numbers, to statistics.

Ah, what a curious thing it is to be a lover of story. I almost can't get a hold of an idea unless I can fit it into a story and as soon as I have the story, I'm not in the least bit objective. The images I conjure are much more vivid than most facts I might learn.

The only happy news in this is that I'm not alone. I don't think it is always a good thing that most of us think about things through stories and that stories have filters for emotions. But I have a greater discomfort at the thought of being alone than I have about being wrong. That's not wise but it is probably true. Not only is it hard to see something that doesn't fit, I am most comfortable if I agree with what the community believes. Of course I can disagree. I often do. I'm just saying that it is much more fun to say, "Yes! Me too! I also believe what you believe!"

What a challenge being a human being is!

I believe that most of you are, to some degree, like me in loving stories. I think if we are completely disinterested in stories and thrive on hard data, we might even be considered antisocial. Anybody seeking out a community like this one is probably not at the far end of that spectrum.

We do need to hear from those of you who work through things with data and measurements . . . even if we get annoyed because you interrupt our stories. Your numbers and revealing questions help us to slow down the movies in our minds before we get too far off base. Sometimes.

Advertisers know all this. And politicians. And the evening news. We can pretty easily be manipulated.

Consider this scenario: you are driving blithely along and suddenly see a billboard that says in bold letters: "Look out for your children on the internet! At this moment, there at least 15,000 child molesters on line." Well, you might not, but I would gasp. Geesh. 15,000, that's scary. Then my intellect might kick in and ask how they could know such a thing. Show

me the research. But even so I feel more anxious than I was before. If there were such a billboard and a reporter saw it and later wrote a story about children being stalked, he or she might quote that number again. And, sooner or later, we all might come to believe that the number is real. We might even repeat it.

“You know they say that at any given time 15,000 stalkers are on the internet.”

We are afraid because we conjure images of all manner of modern ills, social change, and ecological devastation, but in 1900 life expectancy was 46 years. In 1980, it was 74. Now it is over 80.

Why aren't we actually getting more comfortable? Why do most people apparently have greater anxiety than ever before in history? Perhaps we are more afraid because there is so much technological change that is beyond our control. We have uneasy feelings. Way back in history uneasy feelings might have meant that a predator was stalking us. Our bodies are still ruled by animal reflexes. If we have to make quick decisions, our gut still tries to rule over our intellect.

Gardner gave this interesting example. After 9-11 many people were afraid to fly. Lots of people stopped flying and drove to their destinations. Because the risk of being killed in a plane crash is about 1 in 160 million miles traveled and car fatalities are close to 1.37 for every 100 million vehicle miles traveled (and I checked this as far as I was able on different web sites that calculate such things, like the National Transportation Safety Board) then that first year alone close to 1600 people died on highways who would not have died if they had taken planes. But driving felt safer. Compared another way, 120 people are killed on average each year while flying compared to 42,000 killed in car wrecks.

Gardner wrote, “. . . car crashes aren't like terrorist hijackings. They aren't covered live on CNN. They aren't discussed endlessly by pundits. They don't inspire Hollywood movies and television shows. They aren't fodder for campaigning politicians. And so in the months following the September 11 attacks, as politicians and journalists worried endlessly about terrorism, anthrax, and dirty bombs, people fled the airports to be safe from terrorism and crashed and bled to death on America's roads. And nobody noticed.”

We are living longer than ever before but apparently we worry more about terrorism, food safety, and violent acts. If we are ruled by fear in how we decide things, we can be downright irrational. I learned that people are willing to pay more for insurance covering “terrorist attacks” than insurance covering “all possible causes.” Just “terrorist attack” or “everything” and people paid more for “Terrorist” coverage. Goofy.

While I was trying to cross check Gardner’s numbers, I came across this: deaths associated with liposuction are between 20 and 100 per 100,000 procedures. (I’m just sayin.’)

For most of us, on most things, our hearts decide and then, sometimes, our heads review our decisions. Reviews are good. Reviews might give us a little more space between our immediate response and what we choose to do.

I think I told you when I spoke last year about Thoreau and his cabin by the lake that he was actually only a mile from town and yet people warned him constantly about the dangers of being so far away. So much for my wondering if this worry is something new.

Politicians, corporations, even activists, know that making people worry about injury, disease, and death is a most effective strategy. We are bombarded daily with messages designed to make us worry. And, it is harder to prove something safe than to tell stories about calamities. We feel irresponsible if we don’t take such warnings seriously. Or at least I do. I dread the “I told you so” from someone who told me to be more careful. It makes me feel shame and shame is really debilitating.

Remember Julius Caesar? “A coward dies many times before his death. The valiant never taste of death but once.” I myself have died thousands and thousands of times. I just wonder how much we damage ourselves by living in this nearly perpetual state of fear.

Of course I also think about Franklin Roosevelt’s line in his first inaugural address, possibly the most famous quote in our language about “fear”: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” What an enduring speech.

Here is a little longer excerpt:

“Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort. The joy and moral stimulation of work no longer must be forgotten in the mad chase of evanescent profits. These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men.”

Wow! How timeless is that? Our current financial upheaval may offer us plenty of challenge, but being fearful about money will not be useful. We are all likely to be OK. We may have hard times but we'll get by. Even during the Great Depression, most everyone was ultimately OK. Don't let fear take you off course. It is not irresponsible to expect that all will be well.

Remember these things, which I slightly adapted from a post by Reverend Tom Schade, First Unitarian, Worcester on our Ministers' Chat:

You are not alone; you have shown before in your life great resourcefulness and ingenuity. Your happiness does not depend on your lifestyle (in fact, research indicates that a person's emotional state is affected for only a very short period of time when their circumstances change -- happy, cheerful people return to being happy and cheerful shortly after going broke -- morose and gloomy folks are not permanently cheered up by winning the Lotto) The life of the spirit is not a hobby that you give up when your discretionary income goes down, but is something essential about who you are that is more important when times are adverse. Your giving, sharing, and generosity are ways that you maintain your power in tough times and no matter how bad it is, somebody has it worse and needs your help. (end post)

Overwhelmingly people during the Great Depression got by. It was undeniably challenging and making do with what you had became more and more important.

My parents were married in 1928. They were the rich ones among their crowd of friends. They were living with my Dad's family but everyone came to their house on Saturday night because my Mom cooked a huge pot of baked beans with molasses. I'm sure there were tough intervals but what they most remembered as they told me about it years later were the stories and the laughter.

Rev. Thom Belote, who wrote our opening reading, also wrote:

“First, take all media reports about the economic downturn causing cataclysmic doom with a grain of salt. Much of the media delights in elevating our levels of anxiety and worry. Fear, while it serves its purpose, can trigger individual health problems and can cause societies to fall short of their great aspirations. Search out those sources and resources that allow us to respond in our own lives with creativity, courage, and wisdom instead of those messages that keep us trapped in fear. . . .”

The writer Dan Savage, who I suppose could be called a cultural commentator, has written about our addiction to fear. In an essay, Savage set out to write about greed, spending several weeks visiting depressing riverboat casinos in the American Midwest. In the essay he discovers that greed does not lead people to the casinos; rather, greed leads people to build casinos. He writes that life in the United States is basically safe for a whole lot of people, that this safety is monotonous, and that people go to casinos to add a contrived element of risk to their fairly safe lives. He points out that after September 11th, business at the casinos was first non-existent and then sluggish for months on end. If you are already on edge, you don't need go to the casinos in order to stimulate your brain chemicals by risking and losing money in the slot machines.”

This all fits for me with the idea that what we crave is the feeling of aliveness. I just watched “Fight Club,” a very violent movie made about 10 years ago. Maybe you've seen it. I think it contrasted the dullness of life lived in an Ikea furnished apartment and the realness of pain in man-to-man combat. We don't want to sleep through our lives so if things get too comfortable, we just might try to stir things up.

I wonder if any of you in long relationships have ever picked a fight just to recover some of that excitement and passion that you had when the bond was new? It has been known to happen.

We may be addicted to the adrenaline of fear and surely that is not healthy. It's like regularly eating food with unnecessary salt. Or modified foods that have more flavor so natural vegetables now taste bland to most of us. We can't easily go back to normal without feeling bored.

At the other end of this spectrum, being willing to face our fears is important. Being with fear, being with everything is a Buddhist principle. To run away, to try to conquer, to ignore: these are as likely to destroy life as to save it.

Pema Chodron writes in Comfortable With Uncertainty:

“What we're talking about is getting to know fear, becoming familiar with fear, looking it right in the eye -- not as a way to solve problems, but as a complete undoing of old ways of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and thinking. The truth is that when we really begin to do this, we're going to be continually humbled. Fear is a natural reaction of moving closer to the truth. If we commit ourselves to staying right where we are, then our experience becomes very vivid. Things become very clear when there is nowhere to escape.

This is the path, isn't it? Every time we challenge our fragile egos, we experience fear. Whether or not we can grow from the experience will depend on whether or not we can stand within the fear and let it undo us.

I think it deserves mention here that we can seek out fear in the physical world by doing things that threaten us with injury or death. We can climb a rock wall, or bungee jump, or skydive. Many people seek these activities as ways to conquer fear. But that is a very low level form of working with fear . . . this is not going to help us grow in the same way as facing our fears around vulnerability in an intimate relationship, or by surrendering ego in meditation.

There's no doubt that many people find physical death frightening, and for those people that may be the cutting edge of growth, but as we move higher along the Spiral, the fear becomes more subtle. For many, failure and embarrassment present a different kind of fear than skydiving. It feels unbearable, but even here, standing within the fear can result in growth.”

Here is my summary of this sermon. (If you have been dozing, listen up for two minutes and you will have the Cliff Notes version.)

It is not good for us to create things to be afraid of for the adrenaline high, nor is it good to run away from reality with all of its scary parts and genuine losses. The healthy path, the spiritual middle way, is to live so far as possible in the moment. “Look to this day for it is life.” No grasping and no pushing away. Welcoming each moment with an open curiosity as it arrives. Releasing as soon as the moment passes. Perfect equanimity. Maybe our financial challenges will be really hard, but today, right now, we are here together in a warm, dry place. Music delights and comforts us. Coffee and snacks are already prepared. Friends are waiting to see us. In this moment, as in so many moments of our lives, we have everything we need.

All is well.

Now, let’s breath together. Notice where you are holding fear in your body at this moment as you sit in this sanctuary. Even here. Notice and let go. At least for the next few minutes. Breath. Release the tension in your body and listen to this poem by Ted Loder:

Gentle me,
Holy One,
into an unclenched moment,
 a deep breath
 a letting go
 of heavy experiences of shriveling anxieties
 of dead certainties,
that, softened by silence,
 surrounded by the light,
 and open to the mystery,
I may be found by wholeness,
 upheld by the unfathomable,
 entranced by the simple,
 and filled with joy.

May it be so.