

For me, that poem by Audre Lorde that we read together responsively, “We Were Never Meant to Survive”, says it all. Fear. We were “imprinted with fear... learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk”¹. Fear. We all experience it, every day. Some days we have big fears, and some days barely perceptible fears. But I challenge you to get through 24 hours without feeling at least a touch of fear.

Do you think I exaggerate? There are different ways of categorizing and naming human emotions. One school of thought that is very influential says that there are really just four basic human emotions. According to this school of thought, these four basic emotions are happiness, sadness, anger, and fear². This was the school of thought that was most popular in my Clinical Pastoral Education – or “CPE” – the training chaplains and ministers do, often in a hospital setting. In CPE, you were often asked to identify the emotion you were feeling at any given time. This is supposed to help you understand and empathize with the emotions of others, as well as understanding yourself better. We were asked constantly, “What are you feeling *right now*?” It was sort of like emotional boot camp. When asked what emotion we were feeling, we CPE students would often say things like, “Well, I’m feeling annoyed.” Or, “I’m feeling heavy.” Or, “I’m feeling unsettled.” And our CPE teachers would say, “‘Annoyed’ isn’t a feeling. ‘Unsettled’ isn’t a feeling. ‘Heavy’ isn’t a feeling.” You only had four feelings – you were either happy, sad, angry or scared. So “annoyed” was really *angry*. And “heavy” was an abstract way of saying that you felt *sad*. And “unsettled” was a fancy way of saying *scared*. Sometimes you felt more than one of the four emotions at once – that was acceptable. We often feel sadness and fear together, or anger and fear together, and so on.

But as much as we CPE students protested that we had just four emotions to choose from, I came to see the power of this system. The other words we were coming up with – “perturbed”, “delighted”, “disturbed”, and so on – these words made things seem too abstract. It’s almost too intellectual. It’s helpful, sometimes, to identify the *primal* emotion you’re feeling. As primal emotions go, happiness, sadness, anger and fear cover just about everything. Your cat might not feel “perturbed”, but I bet it feels *angry* sometimes. Your dog might not feel “delighted”, but I bet it feels *happy* sometimes. And your bunny rabbit might not feel “disturbed”, but I bet sometimes it feels *scared*. All animals, including humans, have these primal feelings. Probably all animals experience at least a fleeting hint of each emotion every day. Today, I want to focus on fear.

Is fear all bad? Usually it’s seen as a negative emotion, along with anger and sadness. In his first Inaugural Address in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt famously said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” I’ve heard that all my life, and wondered: what does it mean, really, “the

¹ From reading #587 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Beacon Press, 1993).

² There are many different ways of “counting” the basic human emotions. One other typical scheme claims there are six basic emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprise. There are many other interpretations. I personally think that disgust is usually some combination of fear and anger; I personally think that surprise is usually some combination of either happiness and fear, or sadness and fear, depending on whether the surprise is perceived as good or bad.

only thing we have to fear is fear itself”? Then I read FDR’s first Inaugural Address for myself. It’s short and sweet. That famous quotation is actually just part of a longer sentence. And it comes very early on in the speech. The complete sentence was, “So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” Then it hit me. FDR was saying what Audre Lorde was saying, in a sense: fear paralyzes. It keeps us from doing what needs to be done, for ourselves, for our families, for our congregations, even for our nation.

Fear paralyzes. We’ve all been there. I know I have. When I do a spiritual assessment on myself, I think my biggest area for needed spiritual growth is becoming less fear-based. Many of us are fear-based, as Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker talked about in our reading³. We’re raised that way, really, as Audre Lorde says. What does it mean to be fear-based? It means focusing on avoiding unpleasantness. It means worrying what others will think of what you say and do. I went to seminary and got my theological training years ago, in the 90s. And yet, I was just ordained not quite two years ago. Why did it take me so long to decide to finish the process of becoming a minister? In a word, fear. I was afraid of ministry, and all that can go wrong... I was afraid of putting myself out there, for instance, in a sermon – for all to hear and criticize. Those who become ministers in the Unitarian Universalist tradition talk about all the “hoops” of the process of the training requirements – getting the Master of Divinity degree, doing internships and clinical pastoral education, and so on. For me, the biggest hoop was, quite simply, fear. It delayed my becoming a minister by about a decade. Sad, isn’t it? And so when I talk about fear being paralyzing, I speak from personal experience. And I know I’m not alone.

One of my favorite quotations is by Elbert Hubbard, who famously said, “To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing.” I shudder to think how many of us *do* less, *say* less, and ultimately *are* less than we can be because of fear. As Frances Moore Lappé noted in our reading this morning⁴, we desperately want to please others... and we desperately fear being rejected by the rest of the tribe. Fear of failure – and the fear of its possible consequences, such as rejection – is one of the biggest fears of all for most of us.

Another prominent Unitarian Universalist that Neil Shister⁵ interviewed for his *UU World Magazine* article was the late Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, renowned minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City. Dr. Church wrote a lot about fear, even as he was facing his own terminal cancer. As Dr. Church put it, “We’re more afraid of failure than we are eager for success.” He goes on: we’re “More afraid of pain than eager to seek pleasure. More afraid of embarrassment than willing to take chances on new experiences.” Yet Church believed that “it is precisely when we overcome [fear] that ‘all of the amazing things in our life happen.’” For Church, the flip “side of fear is freedom.” Church said, “We’re typically balancing competing claims of security against liberty... But ultimately” he says, “you have to sacrifice safety... As human beings we are sentenced to death and sentenced to life at the same time.” As Shister summarizes, “The option Church advocates: choose life.”

³ Neil Shister, “The Fear Patrol: Unitarian Universalists offer insights into the cultural and personal sources of fear”, *UU World*, Sept/Oct 2004. Rebecca Parker was one of the Unitarian Universalists consulted for the article. You can read the article online at <http://www.uuworld.org/2004/05/feature1.html>.

⁴ *Ibid.* Shister also consulted Frances Moore Lappé.

⁵ *Ibid.* The quotations in this paragraph are of Forrest Church from Shister’s article.

And there we are, with Forrest Church's words, back to Audre Lorde and Franklin Roosevelt. There is no security, no safety, in our existence as human beings. Therefore, the biggest fear we ought to have *is* fear itself. Because no matter what we do, we'll still be somewhat afraid. And so, it is better to speak, and to act – it is better to take a chance – remembering: “we were never meant to survive”⁶.

Overcoming fear is certainly a theme that comes up frequently in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Hebrew Scriptures, in the Book of Hebrews, it says, “So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can humanity do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:6). Likewise, in Psalm 34, it says, “I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.” (Psalm 34:4) Psalm 23 famously tells us that (paraphrasing) “though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we shall fear no evil” for God is with us.

For me, the message about fear in both the Hebrew Scriptures and even in parts the New Testament⁷ is this: if you have faith, you needn't have fear. Faith in God takes away your fear, or it should! To have fear is to have a crisis of faith, even if it's a fleeting crisis of faith. And there's a sense in which this is true. That is, if you trust in God – or if you trust in the goodness of the universe – then you need not have fear of the big picture. If you trust in a Loving God or a benign or even friendly universe, then in the long run, as the medieval Christian mystic Julian of Norwich said, “All will be well, and all will be well, and every manner of thing will be well.”

That's the long run. That's the big picture. But what about the little things? How can we “not sweat the small stuff,” as they say? Perhaps, with practice, we can largely overcome our big fears, like the fear of death. I think we *can* overcome the fear of death. But can we really overcome our fears of the little things? Is it really possible not to worry (or have fear) that what you say might be rejected? That your idea or your creation might not be well-received? Is it possible to overcome our fears of failure?

For me, this is where some more modern mystics from the eastern tradition can help. Osho, the Indian mystic also known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, was a somewhat controversial figure in the 60s, 70s and 80s – as so many “gurus” and spiritual teachers are. But I do appreciate what Osho had to say about fear. He said, fearlessness “is the total presence of fear, with the courage to face it.”⁸ So, in other words, to be fearless is to be full of fear – yet having the courage to face all that fear. Osho said, “Whenever fear comes to you, don't suppress it, don't repress it, don't avoid it, don't get occupied in something so that you can forget about it. No! When fear comes, watch it. Be face to face with it. Encounter it. Look deep into it. Gaze into the valley of fear.”⁹

⁶ Audre Lorde's “We Were Never Meant to Survive”.

⁷ Notably, the letters of Paul talk about fear and faith. See 1 John 4:18: “There is no fear in love: true love has no room for fear, because where fear is, there is pain; and he who is not free from fear is not complete in love.”

⁸ Osho, *Courage: The Joy of Living Dangerously* (St. Martin's Griffin, 1999). This is a pithy, one-sentence summary of his ideas on courage and fearlessness, found on the back cover of the book. The book elaborates on Osho's ideas of fear, fearlessness, and courage.

⁹ Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *Ancient Music in the Pines: Talks on Zen Stories* (Rajneesh Foundation, 1977). This quotation and the one previous caught my eye on <http://www.otoons.com>, which is a website that uses “cartoons to dish out a flower called ‘Osho’”.

Fear doesn't make us suffer. Trying to avoid our fears makes us suffer. Or as Ram Dass, the spiritual teacher formerly known as Harvard professor Richard Alpert, puts it, the "resistance to the unpleasant situation is the root of the suffering."¹⁰ The resistance to the feeling of fear is at the root of suffering, more than the fear itself.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master, poet, a peace activist, says something very similar. He writes:

The first step in dealing with feelings is to recognize each feeling as it arises. The agent that does this is mindfulness.... The second step is to become one with the feeling. It is best not to say, "Go away, fear. I do not like you. You are not me." It is much more effective to say, "Hello Fear, how are you today?" Then you can invite the two aspects of yourself, mindfulness and fear, to shake hands as friends and become one. Doing this may seem frightening, but because you know you are more than just your fear, you need not be afraid. As long as mindfulness is there, it can chaperone your fear.... As long as mindfulness is present, you will not drown in your fear. In fact, you begin transforming it the very moment you give birth to awareness in yourself.¹¹

Finally, Pema Chödrön, an ordained nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and renowned author, wrote about fear in her book *The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*. Chödrön writes:

We have many examples of master warriors – people like Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King.... we [ordinary people] could learn to relate to ourselves and our world as warriors. We could train in awakening our courage and love.... We will find it behind the hardness of rage and in the shakiness of fear.... A warrior accepts that we can never know what will happen to us next. We can try to control the uncontrollable by looking for security and predictability, always hoping to be comfortable and safe. But the truth is that we can never avoid uncertainty. This not knowing is part of the adventure, and it's also what makes us afraid. [There is] ... no promise of happy endings. Rather, this 'I' who wants to find security – who wants something to hold on to – can finally learn to grow up. The central question of a warrior's training is not how we avoid uncertainty and fear but how we relate to discomfort. How do we practice with difficulty, with our emotions, with the unpredictable encounters of an ordinary day? All too frequently we relate like timid birds who don't dare to leave the nest. Here we sit in a nest that's getting pretty smelly and that hasn't served its function for a very long time. No one is arriving to feed us. No one is protecting us and keeping us warm. And yet we keep hoping mother bird will arrive. We could do ourselves the ultimate favor and finally get out of that nest.... We may doubt that we're up to being a warrior-in-training. But

¹⁰ Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *How Can I Help? Stories and Reflections on Service* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), p. 74.

¹¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (Bantam Books, 1991), pp. 53-54.

we can ask ourselves this question: “Do I prefer to grow up and relate to life directly, or do I choose to live in fear?”¹²

Having thought quite a bit about it this week, and at various other times in my life before this week, I’ve come to believe that fear is *not* the enemy of faith. There’s really no avoiding fear in our lives as animals on this planet, and as humans we have layers of fear that can overwhelm. I’ve come to think of fear as helpful. Not fun, mind you, but helpful. Fear can help us develop ourselves spiritually. Sometimes feeling pain is good for us. For instance, we all know that feeling the pain of uncomfortable heat warns us that we might burn, or feeling a sharp pain in our side might warn us that something is wrong internally so that we should seek medical attention – and so pain can help us physically. I think fear is one of the pains that can help us spiritually. Constant feelings of fear can signal us that it might be time to change our way of being in the world. As Frances Moore Lappé reminds us, “moments of fear can themselves become invitations to growth”¹³. Fear might be our wake up call that, as Pema Chödrön puts it, the nest we’re sitting in is “getting pretty smelly and... hasn’t served its function for a very long time.”¹⁴ Could it be time for us to wake up and smell the fear?

In closing, spiritually speaking, the opposite of fear isn’t fearless. Spiritually speaking, the opposite of fear isn’t security. As Osho reminds us, fearlessness contains fear. As Audre Lorde reminds us, there is no security to be found. No. Spiritually speaking, as Forrest Church and others remind us, the opposite of fear is freedom – freedom, and love. We can acknowledge the fear, say “hello” to it as Thich Naht Hanh would do, and free ourselves from its grip. We can feel the fear, but not be paralyzed from being who we are, all we are. I would like to end now with a poem by Maya Angelou, a poem called “Touched by An Angel”¹⁵:

We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.
Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,

love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.
We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love’s light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.

Amen. Blessed be.

¹² Pema Chödrön, *The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Shambhala, 2001), pp. 6-7.

¹³ Shister article, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Chödrön, *ibid.*

¹⁵ This poem was written by Maya Angelou for the television show “Touched By An Angel.” She was a guest star on the show in 1995, where the poem debuted. Angelou gave the show permission to release the poem on the Internet.