

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Descent into Fear”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 4, 2007

Spoken and Silent Meditation

Let us turn inward
 seeking an inner strength, calmness and confidence
 that will bolster our courage as we face down fear.
Let us prepare ourselves to gaze into the abyss,
 the emptiness of a bottomless well
 into which hope unguarded could fall forever.

Fears tug at us like restless children seeking attention.
They lurk in darkened corners
 waiting for an unguarded moment to jump out at us.
Unminded, they walk around naked at mid-day,
 wobble on cliff edges, tease rottweilers,
 play with tarantulas, stand under trees in thunderstorms,
 and love to crawl into dark, narrow tunnels.

But we know them for what they are:
The flashing red lights and bells that warn us of an oncoming train
telling us standing on the tracks right now isn't such a good idea.

May we study our fears
 to separate the wolves from the sheep.
May we respect their power
 to sense the suspicious shadow our minds overlook.
And may we be ever wary
 of the politicians, police agents and preachers
 who would lure our fears with candy
 then put a leash around their necks.

Sermon

Be afraid. Be very afraid.

Anyone remember where that expression comes from? In the 1986 horror film “The Fly,” Jeff Goldblum plays a scientist experimenting with teleportation. Before long, the experiments begin to go wrong. Geena Davis plays a reporter working on the teleportation story. When it becomes clear that the scientist is starting to turn into an insect, he pleads with one of the characters, "don't be afraid". The reporter's response is:

"No. Be afraid. Be very afraid."

The reporter's words powerfully mirror the message of the media. “Be afraid” comes at us from every direction today, so much so, at times, as to paralyze us with fear.

Reporting of the September 11, 2001 attacks amplified a trend already moving through our media saturated world. Never before in the history of civilization have we been so aware of potential threats all around us. How many times did you watch the World Trade Center fall and imagine how many people were dying right before your eyes? Each day in Iraq we see the burned out shells of exploded vehicles and we imagine the death and destruction wrought by bombs in their bellies. In case we miss these horrifying images or start thinking peaceful approaches to conflict resolution might have a chance, our President continues to remind us that terrorists are determined to destroy us because of our freedoms.

The terrifying news doesn't just come from the frontline in the war on terror. There are daily stories about species extinction, deforestation, drought and deluge. Each time gasoline prices go up as they just have, I wonder if we have passed the peak in worldwide oil production. Each time the stock market tanks, I wonder if this could be the beginning of a global recession. Each time I hear about a shooting on the streets of Albany, I fear for the troubled neighborhoods in West Hill, Arbor Hill, and the South End.

But the terror that scares me the most *I can't see*. Those microscopic bacteria and viruses plot our destruction as they mutate. When will the next global pandemic break out? Will it be bird flu? Will AIDS mutate into an airborne form? Did you know that salmonella can colonize spinach and sprouts in a way that cannot be washed off? I just read about this in Science News – a must read for increasing your anxiety level. And what about MRSA, a form of staph infection that we don't have an effective antibiotic for? Something like 20% of us have it on our skin right now. All it would take is a break in our skin defenses to let it in and finish us off.

I found out how easy it is to get a skin infection several years ago. I was working on my sermon on a Thursday morning and noticed a swelling in my leg near my groin. When I put my leg down to stand up, intense pain shot through my body. Some germ

had gotten into my lymph system probably through scratching dry skin on my leg. I was sobered thinking that on the surface of my skin could be lurking an assassin ready to do me in.

Are you in touch yet with the experience of being afraid?

For those of you new to this congregation this morning, it is not my custom to fill you with fear and dread to drive you toward confession, repentance and an altar call. My purpose is to bring fear into consciousness so we might examine it with a more expansive mind together.

Is there anything to be afraid of right now in this room? Do you mostly feel safe and secure among your fellow Unitarian Universalists? The temperature in this room is pleasant, the seats comfortable, and the light in this room pleasing. None of us are in danger of being harmed. If we were animals we would be fearless in this moment. But if a fire were to erupt in one part of the room, perhaps due to a lightning bolt from an angry god sent in my general direction, fear would immediately alert you that you were in danger and it was time to seek the nearest exit in an orderly way.

Fear is necessary for our survival. When we are in danger, fear energizes our body for action. What separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom is our ability to anticipate danger through the use of our imagination. Our lives are not threatened right now but we can imagine them being threatened an hour from now and create a fear response called anxiety.

Anxiety is a physiological state we all know well as tightness in the chest, an accelerated pulse, queasiness in the stomach, shallow breathing, increased sweating and dilated pupils. Blood pressure goes up as blood flows to our muscles to prepare us to fight or run and the immune system and the digestive system's functions are scaled back. Test taking and public speaking are notorious for generating these responses in our bodies.

This ability to use our imaginations to anticipate danger greatly enhances our survival. Civilization would not be possible without the many ways it moderates our behavior. I wouldn't drive a car without knowing others are anxious about what might happen to them if they ran a stoplight. I wouldn't eat the food from the grocery store without knowing those who grew it, harvested it, transported it and displayed it didn't fear for themselves if I was poisoned by it. I wouldn't feel safe in a large gathering if the building hadn't been carefully designed to protect me in an emergency. The ability to anticipate danger for others and ourselves is of great value to humanity.

Valuable as it is, managing our anxiety is crucial to our well-being. Too low and we put ourselves in unnecessary danger. Too high and we are paralyzed with panic, unable to function. One of the great diseases of our time is anxiety disorder. Suddenly, people can be seized by brief attacks of intense terror and apprehension that cause trembling and shaking, confusion, dizziness and feelings of impending doom without any perceivable threat nearby. Having one of these panic attacks is so disturbing that fear of having another can set up a vicious and destructive cycle of anxiety.

The physiological response of panic gives us a powerful sense of how vigilantly our bodies resist death. Our senses are constantly watchful for threats. To imagine the real and present danger of immanent death in our minds at all times would drive us to insanity with anxiety. To cope with our ability to imagine our demise so easily and vividly, Ernest Becker wisely observed we need to find a way to drive that death anxiety out of our minds through denial. We need powerful defense mechanisms to hide the certainty of our mortality from ourselves just to function. But this denial is never perfect and our capacity for anxiety makes us vulnerable.

Using fear to control other creature's behavior can be seen throughout the natural world. But humanity has raised fear manipulation to a high art. Notice how easy it was at the beginning of my sermon to stimulate your anxiety by directing your imagination to potential threats. I think we are all aware of how politicians do this to get our votes and how preachers do it to convert and enslave us to their religious tradition to feed their soul hungry god. The media uses fear to get our attention too, if it bleeds it leads, so we'll also see their advertisements. Once the merchants have our attention, they threaten our social status and the quality of our relationships *unless* we buy their products to enhance them.

Because we all get our levels of anxiety constantly manipulated to serve the agenda of others, we can easily become fearful of the wrong things. Barry Glasser in his recent book, *The Culture of Fear*, gives us numerous examples of which I'll share a few with you from a paper by UU minister Barbara Threet:

Crime rates are actually down in the last decade, but the perception is that crime is rampant, and so we spend more in some states on prisons that we do on schools (about \$100 billion dollars, nationally, mostly on prisons and police). Fear of death from many diseases far outpaces the reality – the odds of dying from breast cancer, which are actually about 1 in 250, are perceived as being more like 1 in 10. And if we could just let everybody know who the sex offenders are and keep them at a significant distance from our schools, all our children would be safe—despite the well-documented fact that most child abuse

happens not by these menacing strangers, but by family members and trusted friends.

The great danger to society is misdirecting our public resources in response to our fears. Instead of dealing with toxic air pollution, we focus on treating the symptom, the asthma epidemic in the inner city likely caused by it. Instead of focusing on the social problem of addicted drug dealers through treatment, we lock up African American youth (not the white kids) in prison for 25 years to life. The anxious electorate shovels money to the prison industrial complex rather than investing in time tested and proven education and social programs that prevent poverty and crime.

Anxiety can be used to inspire us to do good things. We, at times, use it here in this congregation, to stir us to action to fight injustice and oppression. I regularly get emails from organizations urging me to write an advocacy letter by tweaking my fear of what the future of our society might be like if I don't click send. Next Tuesday will be your opportunity to select candidates for office and you should be fearful of who might get elected unless you vote. One vote regularly decides these local races.

Just as fear can call us to act, it can also immobilize us. Fight or flight, of course. Those who want to manipulate our anxiety level know this too. This is why terrorism is such a powerfully destructive force. People stay home or stop going to the market in Iraq for fear of being shot randomly on the street or killed by an improvised explosive device. Public discourse and demonstration becomes difficult when people fear to gather and make themselves a target. As we've recently seen in Burma, governments can disrupt reform movements with terror too. Terror is a tool of social control that depends on the immobilizing power of fear to be effective.

So how do we free our minds from the manipulation of our anxiety level? As Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." The ability to manage our fear response is critical to functioning in society. Without it, we can descend into self-destruction. Ask anyone who suffers from panic attacks if you want to know how debilitating fear can be.

Secular culture isn't interested in freeing us from fear. Finding a life partner, working to earn money, raising a family, recreational activities and civic involvement are common secular solutions to creating a meaningful life. But once we find ourselves on the fringes of the culture, through disability, non-normative sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or skin color, that meaning can easily be threatened. The prime directive of any culture is its survival and those it perceives to threaten that culture's identity and values easily become its enemies. Secular culture, like striving to be

popular in high school, turns out to be a very insecure place to anchor one's identity and derive our meaning as we face life-threatening fears.

Many turn to religion for help. One way to cope with the certainty of our mortality is through the assurance of a safe passage through the pearly gates to heaven or reincarnation as royalty if we follow the religious doctrine today and sacrifice ourselves tomorrow. Many religious traditions diminish the value of being here at all except as preparation for everlasting life somewhere else. If this is what you want from Unitarian Universalism, you'll be sorely disappointed.

Unitarian Universalism doesn't make any supernatural promises to salve our fears about death, *except* the Universalist rejection of eternal punishment for our supposed inherited sin of rebellion against God through Adam and Eve's fruit preferences. What we do offer, as Douglas Taylor so beautifully expressed at the Jeane Blank Lecture at UU Weekend, is a doctrine of human nature. The inherent worth and dignity of every person is a strong foundation for building a sense of meaning and value with which we can confront our fears. Those who would want to manipulate us with fear are eager to question that worth and dignity, encouraging us to surrender it to their power, authority and control.

As social beings, our worth and dignity can easily be brought into question or sublimated to gain social acceptance. For me, the word inherent is key. Our worth and dignity, our value as a human being, is a permanent and inseparable element, quality, or attribute of our being. We can lose our connection to it, we can be separated from it by fear, but it remains a part of our humanity. Fear of death cannot diminish it nor tarnish it.

This is a statement of faith, I know. But I also know it as a living experience that can conquer my fear. My inherent value, your inherent value comes from the inherent value of life of which we are all magnificent expressions. I will die. You will die. The Spirit of Life we embody will never die. And we are inseparable from it.

How do we connect with this living experience of our inherent worth and value? I'm afraid you'll have to come back next week to find out, when I explore the ascent to hope. If you'd like to open up some of the ideas packed in this sermon this morning, it is already uploaded to my sermon web page. Tomorrow night at 7:00pm, I invite you to join me for the first session in my exploration of the topic, from Fear to Hope.

So be it.

Benediction

We have a choice.

We can allow fear to colonize our consciousness
and fill every nook and cranny with its proliferating spores

Or we can control it
with the purifying and clarifying light of reason.

Let us use our fears as wise advisors

but let us never allow them to become a tyrannical ruler.
And let us always be wary of how others try to harness them
and then corral them into herds, armies, and eventually dead ends.

The good life we seek cannot be found by avoiding our fears.

The good life we seek emerges when hope opens the way to love.

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