

Afraid of Fear©

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It was one of those perfect fall Wisconsin mornings, just before the sun rises and I was out having a perfect run. Near my apartment are a series of roads that cut across grassy fields and tall rows of corn. I love it out there because although it's close to home, it feels like I'm out in the middle of nowhere. There are few cars that travel on those roads, especially early in the morning, so that's why I noticed the one that was sitting on the side the road, its engine idling and its lights turned off.

I reached a juncture in the road I was running on; to the right would force me to take the long way home, losing out on precious time that I didn't have. To the left would mean running near this car that was idling in the dark. I felt my heart rate increase, my breath becoming more shallow. I remembered the stories of three other women in different parts of the country who, earlier this summer, had gone out for a run in wooded areas not too far from their homes, and they never returned. Their bodies were found. Their killers presumably have not. I was afraid and uncertain about which direction to go.

The theme for this month is "tell me a story about a time when you faced your fears." This is a month when we typically think about fear because of the lessening light and the growing darkness and because of Halloween and the way it represents a tangible reminder of the things we're afraid of. Halloween is one way that children face their fears by actualizing them. Afraid of monsters? Wear the costume. Confront your fear of zombies? Become one! Can't stand spiders, snakes or skulls? Put them around your house! One of the hardest things about fear is that it's invisible; it lives in us and around us, but we can't actually see it. When we can make it visible, we have a better chance of naming it, confronting and ideally, diminishing the powerful hold it has on us. This morning, I want to look at a

couple of different fears; all of which I think are part of our human experience. I don't take into account particular phobias, but more the common, everyday fears that exist by virtue of being alive and having, one day, to die. And, I want to look at the costs of fear – not only to our body, heart and mind, but to our spirit; that animating principle of life that creates the unique person we are.

As I stood at the crossroads, wondering if I should turn left or right, I instinctively reached into my pocket for the tiny can of pepper spray I usually carry with me when I run. I had forgotten it. I checked the other pocket for my Swiss Army knife. It was sitting on the kitchen counter.

One time, I was heading out for a run and my husband Wayne saw me pocketing the pepper spray. He was puzzled. "What do you need that for?" I realized that we inhabited two different worlds; as a man, he could walk through this world with a certain degree of confidence that he would not be cat-called, jokes or comments made about his physical appearance, or threatening gestures. It simply never occurred to him that he could be the victim of sexual assault. Although I know some women who move through the world without this thought in the back of their minds, many women feel as I do. Sometime between puberty and young adulthood, I began to realize how much of life was spent wondering if a situation was safe, for me, as a woman. This primary fear goes right down to our amygdala brain; that part of our brain that produces a flight or fight response. It produces the kind of breathless anxiety I felt while standing at the crossroads; it what makes us grip our seats when the plane suddenly drops; or causes us to lash out when provoked. It's the kind of fear that Ta-Nehisi Coates describes so eloquently, in his case, the very real fear of the consequences of having a black body in white America. He describes the way that fear

makes young men into thugs and hardens old women's natural softness and turns a father into a belt-beater, all consequences of fear. Having a black or brown body in this culture is the object of white fear; having a woman's body in this culture means living with a certain amount of perpetual fear for personal safety.

So what do we do to ensure our personal safety? We may go out and buy pepper spray or a gun. We invest in security systems and live in neighborhoods that we think of as safe. We take self-defense or model mugging classes as a way of confronting and perhaps controlling our fears. Please don't think I am chiding you if you have done any of these – because with the exception of buying a gun, I have done them all. Yet, when the amygdalan brain is constantly on alert for potential dangers, it tends to overshadow another reality; the place where nothing really happens.

The iconic rock group Talking Heads once sang “heaven is a place where nothing ever happens.” I used to hate that line, because a place where nothing happened seemed so irredeemably boring. But now, as an adult, living in the world where crimes are reported on a daily basis, there is a great balm in the fact that for most of us, the fears that we may live with never come to pass. We get up and drive to and from work, or great distances, arriving home safely at the end of our journey. We go to bed and wake up the next morning without incident. We eat food that doesn't make us ill, we drink water that is clean (unless you live in Flint Michigan), we drive cars that usually don't explode upon impact. All of this we take for granted, and invite other fears about unlikely dangers to emerge.

Should I turn left or right? Left would take me closer to that car that was idling in the now lifting darkness; right would take me farther away. There was still no one around me. I thought about how easy it would be to be dragged into the high cornfields. I thought about how much I wanted to do with my life. I thought about how silly and irrational I was being. I decided that I didn't want my decisions to be overwhelmed by fear. I turned and started walking towards the car.

When you look up phobias on the internet; that is all the things there are to be afraid of, it's a pretty daunting list. Some of them make perfect

sense to me: Acrophobia – fear of heights; Algophobia – fear of pain; Gerontophobia – fear of growing old; Thanatophobia – fear of dying. These are all common and understandable fears; some of which we have control over, such as avoiding heights when possible and others over which we have no control; we may be afraid of pain, old age and death, but we can't avoid it. There are other fears that are puzzling to those of us who don't suffer from it; such as Anthophobia – fear of flowers; chrysophobia – fear of the color orange; Nomophobia – which is fear of being out of mobile phone contact; and one that didn't make the Wikipedia list, but has a page all its own – politicophobia – fear of politics and politicians. Whether or not you have a diagnosable politicophobia, I think it's safe to say that fear has been a driving emotion in this most recent cycle leading up to the Presidential election in November. I suspect it's only going to get worse before it gets better as fear is a powerful and apparently effective tool in garnering votes for one particular candidate or another.

We may feel that this year's election is the worst fear-mongering we have ever seen. Unfortunately, fear as a campaign strategy works. Some of you may remember the famous 1986 Willie Horton ad, which was aimed at then Governor Michael Dukakis by the George H.W. Bush campaign. The purpose of the ad was to create fear in the minds of white American voters that a vote for Dukakis was a vote for a bleeding heart liberal who allowed convicted felons to go free on a weekend furlough program. It worked. It's arguable whether it changed the election, but there's no doubt that it inserted fear in voters' minds and that George H.W. Bush won handily. Candidate Jill Stein said “this politics of fear has actually delivered everything we were afraid of.” The current political climate holds up xenophobia – fear of the stranger, fear of immigrants taking over American jobs; fear of Muslims, all of whom are depicted as potential terrorists; fear of black and brown people; though they are now being visibly courted; all of this is fed to a media that needs conflict to feed our insatiable appetite for controversy. At the heart of all this rhetoric is fear; fear that what we currently have will be taken away;

and fear that what we want to have we never can get.

I have fears too, but they're not about having white privilege taken away or not being able to buy what I want; my fear has to do with what every nation has the potential to become: what my urban dictionary calls "fearocracy," which is governing through fear while posing as a democracy." We have plenty of examples of civilized nations descending into dictatorship because of the brilliant manipulation of a people's fear. Some of us recently viewed the film, *The Sharps War, Defying the Nazi's*, which tells the story of Waitstill and Martha Sharp who risked their lives to save Jews and refugees in Nazi Germany. The film offers a chilling reminder of how Hitler's campaign began with a promise and a hope of a better Germany, and quickly descended into anti-Semitism and wholesale Holocaust. There is something in us that needs a scapegoat and fear is the quickest way to identify and demonize the object of our fear.

This past Thursday, I was invited to have a live on-air conversation at radio station WHBY 1150 AM about the repeated theft of our Black Lives Matter Banner. One of the reporters asked if the people of the congregation were afraid. I tried to answer him honestly by saying "yes, I think some are afraid of what might happen, but what I see is that people are continuing to show up for racial justice anyway." He then asked me "what should we be doing?" What I said was something like "Show up. Engage with communities that are working on issues of racism and white privilege. Come to the Fellowship!" My underlying point was one of the antidotes to fear is to engage with it, because the actual risk is usually far much less than what we imagine.

I was getting closer to the car now. As I looked harder, I saw two shadowy figures; one behind the steering wheel and the other one, taller, sitting in the passenger seat. Now the car had begun to move very slowly, inching along. Why was this car going so slow? And now there were two people in the car instead of one. I could feel my fear rising again. I took a deep breath and approached the car on the other side of the street, as far away from it as

I could. As I looked across the road, I could clearly see the driver of the car.

To be alive is to live with fear. It was built into our DNA and for good reason – it keeps us safe. If we had no fear of heights or wild animals we may not be alive for very long. So of course, there is a healthy fear. We don't deliberately put ourselves or others in harms way, because we value our life and the lives of other humans. We allow our children to roam around the park, but we don't leave them there overnight. But there is an unhealthy side of fear too, a chronic buzz in the background, like a kind of fearful tinnitus, that inhibits our ability to be fully present to the normal joys of life which we take for granted. It's the fear that constantly whispers "yes, but this could happen next..." or "what if..." or "it could get worse!" It's the kind of fear that insists on so much protection that we don't allow a bruised knee or a broken heart. It's the kind of fear that terrorists have used so effectively, to make us turn our lives into a locked prison, not allowing our lives, or our hearts, to be open to one another. It's one way to live of course, but the spiritual cost is enormous. The spiritual cost of living in constant fear is to become like the walking dead; you are not really alive, but have enough momentum and power to not really be dead either. It's a kind of purgatory on earth and one that I think would make for a truly dangerous world that we should be afraid to live in.

I looked through the driver's window and saw two hands gripping the top of the steering wheel. The driver was a teenage girl, who looked utterly terrified. The shadow figure next to her, her father, I presume, was gesturing for her to move forward, to put her foot on the gas, and at that moment, she did, in a spurt, the car lurched forward and stopped. I saw her put her head on the steering wheel, and her dad, looking alternately annoyed and sympathetic. I remembered my own first time behind the wheel of a car and how when I put my foot on the gas I felt a surge of both power and fear. "I could kill somebody" I thought to myself. I remember my dad sitting next to me, patiently telling me to just go easy, a little bit at a time until you get the hang of it.

That seemed like good advice for both learning how to drive a car, and for life. Just go

easy, a little bit at a time, until you get the hang of it. As human beings, we may never get the hang of fear, but there are antidotes to quell the anxiety that is part of the human condition. One of the ways is to find, develop and deepen with a spiritual practice. If you don't have one, explore this year's Wellspring Wednesdays at the Fellowship and experiment with developing a spiritual practice. For me, I meditate and pray on a daily basis. I'd like to say that I do this because I'm a spiritually enlightened being; but the truth of the matter is, these practices help to counter the fears that I have of simply being alive and of the reality of having to die. This month's Wellspring will be led by Jennifer Levenhagen who suggests that using art and music as a spiritual practice is a way of gracefully handling life's challenges.

The other antidote to fear is to engage. I am by nature a pretty deep introvert so when thrown into a room of people I don't know well I literally want to run. What keeps me engaged is curiosity and, thankfully, a deep love of the human spirit. I don't mean to sound like a walking advertisement for the Wellspring Program, but it just so happens that this year's Wellspring in Oshkosh is featuring a series of conversations with immigrant communities, and to hear their stories about what it is like to live as a stranger in a strange land. Next Wednesday at Oshkosh Wellspring will be a panel discussion on immigrant communities in Oshkosh/Wisconsin and throughout the rest of the year, you'll have an opportunity to have a personal conversation with people from a variety of cultures and ethnic backgrounds who are making this place their home. Engaging with the person we may perceive as the stranger drives out fear and invites in friendship and a shared sense of our common humanity.

And finally, the third antidote to fear is to develop a deep and abiding trust in life itself; knowing that the end of our lives is beyond our control. What matters of course, is how we live those lives now, because they will have an impact on the way in which we die and the way in which people will remember us. For some, death is seen not as an end, but a beginning, a portal opening into a new life; one that is infinitely better than this one. If that image of eternity is meaningful and provides comfort – that's good. If, however, you don't

believe there is life after this one, then it does require us to make the most of the one we've got; and that everything we do does matter – whether we live in fear or in faith; whether we allow ourselves to be bruised or spend most of our life requiring protection.

The good news about fear is that we can be fearful together OR we can be courageous together. This summer, when the banner was stolen and I decided to host a dedication of a new sign, I have to admit to you, I was afraid. I was less afraid for me, but for all of you. I was afraid that someone might try to hurt us and if that happened, and I survived, I don't think I could have ever forgiven myself. But when I saw so many of you coming, with your children, with your spouses, and friends and when one of you said to me, "well, I guess if something was to happen, I wanted to be with my people," I realized that I didn't have to be the courageous one alone; we were going to do it together. It's why we live in faith together and not in fear; and by faith I mean that in which I can place, we can place, our ultimate confidence and hope. For me, some days I can call that where my ultimate confidence is placed by the name God, and then, on other days, God seems to be far away, and I just need the reality of another human hand; another human heart to hope me – and us – into acts of daring, boldness and courage. The Christian scriptures tell us that "perfect love casts out fear," but our love need not be perfect. It just needs to be present. When that happens, there is no room for anything else. Our fear may never be completely cast out, but we can crowd it into a corner, by the ways we fill our lives with compassion and gratitude for all the gifts of life we enjoy and share.

May it be so.

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