

Fear

*A Sermon Preached at the First Unitarian Church
Of Albuquerque, New Mexico by Christine Robinson
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This is a story Molly Ivins told, a story originally by a friend of hers named Johnny Faulk who, she says,

“used to tell a story about when he was a Texas Ranger, a captain in fact. He was seven at the time. His friend Boots Cooper, who was six, was sheriff, and the two of them used to do a lot of heavy law enforcement out behind the Faulk place in south Austin. One day Johnny's mama, having two such fine officers on the place, asked them to go down to the hen house and rout out the chicken snake that had been doing some damage there.

Johnny and Boots loped down to the hen house on their trusty brooms (which they tethered outside) and commenced to search for the snake. They went all through the nests on the bottom shelf of the hen house and couldn't find it, so the both of them stood on tippy-toes to look on the top shelf.

I myself have never been nose-to-nose with a chicken snake, but I always took Johnny's word for it that it will just scare the living ~~shit~~ daylights out of you (which this one did.) Scared those boys so bad that they both tried to exit the hen house at the same time, doing considerable damage to both themselves and the door.

Johnny's mama, Miz Faulk, was a kindly lady, but watching all this, it struck her funny. She was still laughin' when the captain and the sheriff trailed back up to the front porch. "Boys, boys, " said Miz Faulk, "what is wrong with you? You know perfectly well a chicken snake cannot hurt you."

That's when Boots Cooper made his semi-immortal observation. "Yes ma'am," he said, "but there's some things'll scare you so bad, you hurt yourself."

Well, that's a sermon right there, isn't it? All else is commentary. Naturally, I can't resist commenting.

First of all, we have the capacity for fear for a reason. This emotion helps keeps us safe. A person without fear is a very likely to soon be a dead person, an injured person, an attacked person, and so on. The unpleasantness of this emotion motivates us to do what we need to do to keep ourselves safe. I have my fear-motivated list of never agains, as you probably do...never again will I walk a railroad trestle, explore sea caves in a storm tide, drive into a flooded ford, let my dog run off leash in an unfenced field. Those are good decisions. They protect me and what I love. But I have to remember that just because it feels like fear doesn't mean it is actually fearful. Our bodies are hard wired to fear snakes, even the ones that can't harm us. It's in our genes, and it takes a concerted effort to get over it.

Our fears are also important because they tell us what matters the most to us. We fear for our lives, for our loved ones, for our values, for our nation, for our legacy, our comforts, our property. We may feel very sorry for the people of the war-torn middle east, or the violence torn streets of South Chicago, and we may

understand their fear, but unless we know some of them, we do not feel fear for them.

Fear may have its good sides but it is not good for our bodies. It fills us with the hormones of fight and flight, revs up our hearts, reduces our peripheral vision, pumps blood away from the thinking brain and into the muscles ready to fight or run. And if we do fight or run, those reactions dissipate and all is well. But fight or flight is not the appropriate set of options for dealing with, say, your fury about electoral politics or your fears for the future of a warming planet. So unless you turn off the tv and go for a brisk walk, you are going to stew in your body's anger juices, and they are not healthy.

Anger is closely related to fear and easier, in this society to admit to. We get angry at threats, from the clear and present driver who nearly crashes into us while texting, something I know you never do yourselves and which therefore makes you even angrier, to the somewhat more removed but possibly more life changing political candidate you are sure would ruin your country or embody values you despise. Anger has its place in the world. It can motivate us to action just like its cousin, fear. But Anger and Fear must be acted on to be healthy. Appropriate actions taken out of anger or fear gain energy from emotion. But living in anger or fear, stewing in anger or fear...that's not good, for those emotions not only make us miserable, they are states of our body awash in hormones and chemicals which in the long run are very bad for our health and wellbeing.

Anger is harder on our bodies than fear, and both can be soothed to some extent by recognition. Saying to ourselves, "I'm angry," and identifying the source of

our anger, which should always include, “Because I am afraid that...” not only gives us good information, it gives us a perspective. We can evaluate just how threatened or angry we need to be in this situation, once we have started to talk to ourselves about what we are feeling, and all that thinking, in itself reminds us that we may feel fear or anger, but we bigger than our fear or anger.

I’ve never been much of a fan of Franklin Roosevelt’s “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” for it seems to me that, at least in the short term, there are all kinds of things to fear, all kinds of threats to our well being and our ways of life, but the saying seems to run true in this case: looking back on September 11 15 years ago and all the things we feared on that day, it is not more terror that has damaged us very much, but our fear of more terror. The towers have been re-built, the Pentagon fixed, air travel has resumed. Some lives were changed forever but almost all have adjusted. But our nation has changed. We went to war out of fear and that war and the wars required to fix its unintended consequences have been damaging young lives and costing the body politic ever since. Ironic, isn’t it? In the end we feared that the world around us had spun out of control but it was our own society and selves that we were not able to control. It was not foreign air passengers that we needed to fear but the inner workings of our own psyches and those of our neighbors, and how those could be exploited by the powerful that ended up hurting us most. It turned out to be true, what Nazi thinker Albert Goering said, that, democracy or not, fear rules. “Voice or no voice,” he wrote, “the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to

danger. It works the same in any country." And so it seems to have worked in ours. This is sobering. We thought we were better.

Another comment. Human beings are notoriously poor at assessing risks and threats, the things that make us afraid. After 9/11, for instance, for a couple of years, people's fear of flying kept them out of the skies, but it didn't keep them home. Instead they drove. They drove lots and lots and lots of extra miles to Grandmother's house and to business meetings and Disneyland. And because driving is considerably more dangerous than flying per mile traveled, even when you factor in possible terrorism, a lot of people died who, statistically, would not have died if they had stuck with the friendly skies. You can read entire books on this problem of human nature.

Social scientists tell us that people are hard-wired to believe their leaders when they feel threatened. This probably helps us to follow a strong leader in an emergency, but when fear is not situational but around all the time, this trait leads us around by our noses. When we are afraid, we focus on peripheral, superficial clues and we don't follow complex logic -- only what we feel. If it were a real crisis, we wouldn't have time, but in our day to day lives being afraid leaves us vulnerable to those who will take advantage of us.

It is in the best interests of an unpleasant assortment of rascals to keep us fearful...those who want to sell us on dubious ideas, and those who want to sell us dubious products. Further, since our media, entertainment, and to an increasing

extent, our news sources, are paid for by ratings and clicks, it is in the best interest of those on whom we rely for the information critical to decision-making to keep us fearful, because the more fearful we are, the more often we check, whether it is the weather or the latest disaster, and the more fearful are, the more open we are to any authoritative message, the simpler the better, and the less able and willing we are to actually think about that message.

I will leave it to you to work out for yourselves the consequences of those trends on today's politics and because I really want you to stop and do that, I will tell you something else.

Be Not Afraid.

Fear is an emotion. We are not in complete control of it. But we can influence ourselves and our state of mind, and in the case of fear, we should. Because if we are afraid of the wrong things, we are liable to hurt ourselves and those around us, just like those boys in the chicken house did themselves damage in their hurry to depart the premises of a snake they both knew perfectly well couldn't hurt them.

Martin Luther King once wrote a sermon on four steps for dealing with fear. He knew whereof he spoke, as a person who had walked through gauntlets of barely controlled rage, who lived with death threats against himself and his family, and who was part of an organization which coached ordinary persons like you and me to face their fears and walk calmly into them.

King admonished his congregation to face our fears, admit them, and ask what we are REALLY afraid of. You can't fight an enemy you don't understand.

Secondly, we can attempt to master our fears and go on anyway. This involves us in the discipline of courage, which is not lack of fear, but the ability to carry on productively in spite of fear. This trait is increased by practice. It's good for us to practice overcoming our small fears. We do it by reminding ourselves of all that we value. A soldier who runs into the line of fire to save a comrade is a soldier who is in touch with her belief that, much as she values her life, first and foremost, she is a good friend. A demonstrator who braves a line of furious counter protesters is in touch with the fact that, in spite of what feels like danger, what is more important is his cause. No small number of persons, scared, as most people are, of public speaking, have decided that what they have to say to their fellow UU's is more important than their fears and have come to this pulpit and...sometimes even shaking, said it. Our Unitarian father, Ralph Waldo Emerson said that one "who is not every day conquering some fear has not learned the secret of life." That's actually the quotation with which King started this particular sermon. He wanted his people to be ready for what faced them. Attending to and overcoming small fears is a good practice.

Thirdly, King reminds, us, fear is mastered through love. When we see the people we fear as fellow human beings, with wants and needs and vulnerabilities pretty much like ours, our compassion is engaged and we cease to fear.

Finally, we confront fear with faith. Faith in the larger goodness of things gives us an inner equanimity to deal with what we have to deal with. Most of us share that faith, whether we believe that this is the nature of the universe or the nature of God's world; we believe that there is a larger goodness to things even when our life seems out of control and can find a serenity within that belief. But that takes work. It takes analyzing our fears, it takes engaging the higher faculties that remind us of the meaning of our life and our true self, and it takes being in touch with our compassion.

It is important for us to face our fears; not only the large fears like fear of death, but the smaller ones, like the fears of social disruption that could come from terrorism or the proliferation of guns in our society. It is important for our own ability to live serenely and it is also important because the courage and ability to wisely do what needs to be done is a social necessity in times of crisis. The fact is that we have many things to fear besides our fear itself. But our fear itself is what is in our control and until we have dealt with it wisely and well.