

Preparation for Fear, Courage, and Faith

At some time in our lives, we all face fear, whether real or imagined, intractable or fleeting. How we manage fear is deeply associated with our ability to trust, to hope, to imagine, and to love.

We have three basic reactions to fear: fight, flight, or freeze. If fear is a rational reaction to a threat, the cause will be apparent to us, and probably to others. Our reaction, however, may depend not only on the situation, but on our psychology – how we grew up, and how we have previously experienced threat. If, as psychologist Erik Erikson tells us, trust is the first human need, then if that need is violated or not met, we may become fearful and expect the world, or our current situation in it, to be a threatening place. The difficulty lies in determining the severity of the threat. Our responses may also depend on our culture. For those in an abusive relationship, especially one that their society, family, or religion does not take seriously, endurance may seem the only alternative.

FDR famously said, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” but living in the face of fear is a state we all experience at some time, and it cannot simply be dismissed with inspiring slogans. Living with fear requires us to find courage. To face the fear, to shine a flashlight under the bed to scare away monsters, or to honestly imagine the limitations and dependence that come with a serious medical diagnosis, takes hope and bravery. Very few of us look forward to such a growth experience, since it will take us into unknown places.

Our personal fears, whether imagined or real, may make us feel lonely. These fears can lead us to isolation and paralysis, or they can create courage we did not know we had to move through the fear. Within each experience of fear is an opportunity to challenge our perception of ourselves and others. To paraphrase Fritjof Capra, the fear does not vanish immediately, but will disintegrate as we work with wisdom and trust that grow with use.

Some fear is experienced both individually and collectively, such as a pandemic or war. We can turn to each other to find strength. The warmth of solidarity does not extinguish the source of our fear, but makes it bearable by reinforcing our common humanity.

Existential fear is deeply individual, yet we all share it – the fear of death, the fear that our lives lack meaning. Some of us find reassurance against these fears in a belief system, whether that is religious tradition or science. “Fear not, only believe” is a teaching of some theistic religions, while other traditions teach that letting go of attachment can relieve our fear. How can this promise to erase fear work in the face of real threat? We see the notion that “I believe in a protective god” can foster reckless disregard, justifying denial that allows us to refuse to use a seatbelt or wear a face mask.

Such denial may be comforting but denies us the opportunity to develop our full spiritual potential. Facing the reality of our daily lives does require courage and some kind of faith in the meaning of our existence, or just a faith in the value of searching for meaning. That faith may take many forms, and may combine our own seeking with spiritual traditions – a belief in god’s love, a faith in humanity, an acceptance of change and non-attachment, a trust in the cycles of the natural world, a trust in our own inner light. These forms of faith, and others, can sustain us as we bring courage as we are able, face our fears, and explore the possibilities of faith for our lives and for the deep questions of our existence.

Looking back, it strikes me that my childhood and early youth were one long battle against fear.
Eleanor Roosevelt

I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.

Frank Herbert, Dune

Fear is the mother of foresight. *Thomas Hardy*

In her experience fear came from an expectation of something untoward. In her work Maisie saw fear revealed time and again, but had learned that it was experienced in degrees. Anticipation of bad news resulted in a more depressed aura, different from one who was fearful of another person, or who feared failing to do something, or perhaps the consequence of a given action. *Jacqueline Winspear.*

For every trouble, illness, worry, grief, hurt or sorrow that afflicts a Muslim, even the prick of a thorn, Allah removes in its stead some of his minor sins. *Hadith Qudsi*

I believe that every single event in life happens in an opportunity to choose love over fear.

Oprah Winfrey

When we recognize that we have a habit of replaying old events and reacting to new events as if they were the old ones, we can begin to notice when that habit energy comes up. We can then gently remind ourselves that we have another choice. We can look at the moment as it is, a fresh moment, and leave the past for a time when we can look at it compassionately. *Thich Nhat Hanh*

Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more so that we may fear less. *Marie Curie*

Questions to Ponder

1. What are your fears right now? This is for your eyes only, not to share. The Words of the Day activity asks you to mention a fear to share, but here you might list more of them.
2. Think about some of your childhood fears and the fears that your family had. How did you and your family cope with these fears?
3. Reflect on situations in your life where fear has affected you positively.
4. How do you deal with fear? What strategies and resources and spiritual practices do you use?
5. Have you ever been in a situation where you were sustained in your fear by the support of a community? What was that like?
6. What are your fears for the world or for our society? What are your hopes or plans for the future?
7. Think about a time when you went from fear to hope or courage or acceptance even though the basic situation had not changed. How would you describe the shift in your attitude?

Words of the Day

Before the Gathering, reflect on a fear that you are willing to share and your practice of courage or faith in living with it. The Words of the Day sentence is “One fear I am living with now is ... and to live with it I bring the practice of ...”