

Living with Fear
Sunday, February 5, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

A number of years ago I drove into the parking lot of a library near my home just in time to see a man drive by the front door of the library and toss a fast-food bag out of his window and onto the sidewalk. I was not sure what to do. In the DC suburbs, from where I had recently moved, the proper response might have been to call the police, who would have cordoned off the area and checked the bag for a bomb. But in rural Virginia I wasn't sure I should call the police for tossed trash. I didn't call the police, but since I didn't get out of my car and put my library book into the return box by the thrown bag either, perhaps I should have. I came back the next day to return my book.

What is a reasonable precaution and what is overreaction?

At the end of 2014 when my daughter's family was still in Europe, she told me that my son-in-law had been told he could not be off base in uniform. He had to change into his uniform once he got onto base, and he had to change out of uniform before he left the base to go home. There was fear that wearing an American uniform would mark one as a prime target. My daughter said she also had no desire to go to the Christmas markets, not just because the boys found them boring, but also because she did not want to be in places where large groups of people gathered. And this was all a year before the November 13, 2015 series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris.

What is dangerous and should be avoided and what is allowing fear to keep us from life?

I saw a two panel cartoon this week. In panel one an older white man is pulled over by the police. He is calling home to say he will be late. In panel two a young black man is pulled over by the police. He is calling home saying, "I love you, Mom."

I went to an NAACP meeting one evening this week where the President mentioned that the police had been asked to patrol the road a bit more while the meeting was taking place. The NAACP building is on a rather dark backroad. One member suggested that maybe it would be better if one of the group carried a weapon and acted as security. The President pushed back hard. There should be no weapons brought to meetings. They would trust the local police to provide security. They paid taxes for the local police and unless they were given some reason not to use the police, they would use them.

Whom should we trust? Whom should we fear?

About a month ago I went to an interfaith program. The program emcee was a Muslim man who shared how he was treated when he got off an airplane on 9.11.2001 wearing traditional garb and having a fairly long beard. His wife thought he had been on one of the planes that had been crashed and was frantic, but that was not the problem. He was being detained and roughly interrogated. During World War II we put 110-120,000 people of Japanese ancestry in internment camps, 62 percent of whom were United States citizens, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internment_of_Japanese_Americans.

What kind of harm do we allow ourselves to commit when we are afraid?

In the last year rights and inclusivity we thought we had fought for and won are being pulled out from under us. If your 15-year-old granddaughter becomes pregnant may abortion not be a choice? When your trans niece goes to school will all the positivity of home be countermanded? Will your biracial grandchildren learn nothing of their black, Asian or Native American history in our schools?

Will fear of these things overwhelm and paralyze us into inaction or will they motivate us to do what we can to reclaim these rights and inclusion?

Life is living with all of these questions. Life is living with all of these fears.

The twentieth century American black, lesbian writer Audre Lorde wrote this "Litany for Survival",

"For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours;

"For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

"And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid

love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

“So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.”

Lorde said, “For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.” To be able to live with fear, to be able to survive she suggests we
remember that the purpose of life is not to avoid dying. None of us is going to do that. So, if we are
going to die anyway how do we want to live?

Someone you all know of said, “You may be 38 years old, as I happen to be. And one day, some great
opportunity stands before you and calls you to stand up for some great principle, some great issue,
some great cause. And you refuse to do it because you are afraid.... You refuse to do it because you
want to live longer.... You’re afraid that you will lose your job, or you are afraid that you will be criticized
or that you will lose your popularity, or you’re afraid that somebody will stab you, or shoot at you or
bomb your house; so you refuse to take the stand.

Well, you may go on and live until you are 90, but you’re just as dead at 38 as you would be at 90. And
the cessation of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit,”
the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I am not sure I am brave enough to put my life on the line, but I am an older American-born, cisgender,
straight, white woman. I have had the privilege of not feeling like my life is on the line simply because of
who I happen to be. Surviving has been my supposed default. I am just beginning to realize that that
very fact should call me to ally myself with those who are not so privileged, who know in their gut every
day that they were not meant to survive.

How do we live with fear? Dr. King’s answer and mine is, “by caring.”

A final poem by the Unitarian Universalist minister Thandeka dedicated today to Tyre Nichols, George
Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Matthew Shepard, Emmett Till, Atatiana Jefferson and so many more.

“Despair is my private pain
Born from what I have failed to say
failed to do
failed to overcome.
Be still my inner self
let me rise to you

let me reach down into your pain
and soothe you.
I turn to you
to renew my life
I turn to the world
the streets of the city
the worn tapestries of
brokerage firms
crack dealers
private estates
personal things in the bag lady's cart
rage and pain in the faces that turn from me
afraid of their own inner worlds.
This common world I love anew
as the life blood of generations
who refused to surrender their humanity
in an inhumane world
courses through my veins.
From within this world
my despair is transformed to hope
and I begin anew
the legacy of caring."