

## Fear Itself

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First Parish in Brookline

*Find a stillness. Hold a stillness. Let the stillness carry me.*  
*Find the silence hold the silence, let the silence carry me.*  
*In the spirit, by the spirit, with the spirit giving power,*  
*I will find true harmony.*

I hear this Transylvanian hymn as a Unitarian Universalist lullaby. It comes to us from the “land beyond the forest” the land of the fictional Dracula and the real life Vlad the Impaler. The tune comes to us from a real life place that has stood between the conquering forces of the Turks and Russians from the East and the conquering forces of the Holy Roman Empire and Nazi Germany and now the European Union from the West. This ancient lullaby leads us to the place where we can rest in the spirit of life, free of the fear of annihilation.

**Fear of annihilation is the chief demon of the named and unnamed ghosts that haunt our nights and waking dreams.** Resting in the rolling, lap-like silence between the twin pulses of breathing and heartbeat can bring us to a place and a way to face the demons of our fear and name them.

Our American lullaby, “Rock-a-bye Baby,” holds both the comfort and the threat of annihilation. Do you have a memory of being comforted? Perhaps you were comforted by a parent, a grandparent, a neighbor, a babysitter, a tree, a star-filled night, or the sun slowly rising out of the ocean. Take a moment to rest in that memory of comfort. (And if you cannot find a moment of comfort in your memory, be sure to get a hug before you leave church today.)

The primary reason you are able to recall that memory is because the neurochemistry of *fear* lays down the memory of *comfort*. Babies and toddlers spend many moments in the grip of terror -- terror of falling, terror of sudden noises, terror when the mother disappears. The comfort we recall is remembered at all because of the terror that preceded it. **Terror is the glue that coheres our remembrance of consolation.**

Perhaps on some level, we humans know about the power of fear to lay down the traces of the memories of comfort. For, at some moment, we adults who care for children decide its time to scare their little tykes on purpose. We sing Rock-a-bye Baby and threaten crashing cradles; we play peek-a-boo and disappear; we fling the infant into the air or place them precariously on bouncing knees that collapse. We tell fairy tales where stepmothers send children into dark forests to be eaten by wolves or witches. And every year there is Halloween.

Halloween is a time when we can let loose all of our creative and sadistic impulses and terrify those we love. If you've every played the part of witch, or goblin, or axe murderer in a haunted

house then you know the thrill, the ecstasy of seeing child after child undone by pure terror. When we had a haunted house at the FP of Canton, I loved to watch the kids come through the final door: they were flushed with fear, clinging to their moms and dads, and begging to go through the haunted house again. They loved mastering their fears.

**The emotion of fear is fundamental to our survival as a species.** We have bigger brains that house vastly more fears than any other animal. Evolutionary biologists suggest that since we are an unspecialized animal—since we do not have the speed of a jaguar, the strength of a lion, the eye of the hawk, or the endurance of a camel we have evolved conscious planning as our means of survival.

In the words of science writer, Rush Dozier, "Human beings have evolved a huge conscious brain, not only for remembering our endless variety of fears, but for analyzing, classifying, unraveling, and neutralizing them. Because we have so much to fear, we have much to learn...." (Rush Dozier, "Fear Itself: The Origin and Nature of the Powerful Emotion That Shapes Our Lives and Our World," St Martin's Press, New York, NY, 1998)

Being a fear-driven species, however, makes us unstable. The primitive fear system of "flight or flight" works faster than consciousness and has saved our lives for millions of years. It makes us wary in the dark. It makes us fearful of being separated from our own kind. Our primitive fear system can make us violent or paralyzed.

The rational fear system has evolved with the frontal lobes of the brain. The rational fear system knows the difference between a rattlesnake and a garter snake, a cooking fire and a house fire. It is this rational fear system that has allowed humans to harness the flames that have cooked our food and taken us for rides to the moon and beyond. Consciousness of both systems allows us to observe which system is at driving our behavior.

We are singing our way to that consciousness when we sing the words, "Find a stillness, hold a stillness, let the stillness carry me." **The only way we can actually find a stillness, hold a stillness, and let the stillness carry us when we are actually frightened is to have, over time, desensitized the primitive fear system in a way that dampens the primitive reactions of violence and paralysis.**

And so when we frighten our children with things that jump out of the dark, we are desensitizing the dread of the primitive fear system. When we don masks with huge teeth dripping blood we are bringing the images of the primitive fear system into consciousness for ourselves and for our children. And perhaps we are doing more than desensitizing the primitive fear system, we are also conveying and practicing the terrifying truth of our very real mortality.

We tell the real truth of our own certain deaths to our children when we dress up as ghosts and skeletons. It is a truth too big to tell to us and to them all at once. **We need the space of imagination to save us from panic. When we consciously play with those terrors in imagination we give our big brains some options for planning to be remembered and loved. This has been the work of parents for generations.**

The popular culture of the media has given us some terrifying images of bogeymen and apocalypse lately. It is possible to watch some variety of Law and Order at any time, night or day. Some of us, like one of Pavlov's dogs, are shaped by the musical introduction: dunt-dunt."

Perhaps the media is a form of adult religious education. I wonder if as a whole culture we are engaging our imaginations with truths that are too overwhelming to really take in. The truths of perversion and addiction, the truths of the fragility of our way of life, the truth that the very viability of life on earth is threatened.

Global warming, the ozone hole, overpopulation, starvation and malnutrition, war, unemployment, the destruction of species and the rain forests, pollution of water and air, pesticide and herbicide poisoning, errors in genetic engineering, erosion of topsoil, overfishing, terrorists, anarchy and crime, the possibility of a nuclear mishap, chemical warfare or all out nuclear war together or separately are ominous portents for apocalypse.

Theologian Walter Wink observes: "We Homo sapiens are witnessing the greatest annihilation of species in the last 65 million years, and our children may live to witness ecocide with their own eyes. So while we are understandably preoccupied with terrorism, and must do everything necessary to stamp it out, we must at the same time wake up to these more serious threats that could effectively end (human) life on this planet."

We are at a time of evolutionary choice. We can choose to continue to allow forces beyond our control to stimulate our primitive fear systems into the violence and paralysis or we can make a practice of soothing ourselves into a consciousness that can plan and act with care.

Moses, Jesus, and Buddha are very present ancestors in the human project of evolving beyond the primitive fear system.

Moses resonates with the psalms when he says in the book of Exodus: "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the (God of Being)."

His words are echoed Psalm 146: "God is our refuge and strength, our safety in times of trouble. We are calm though the whole earth trembles and the cliffs fall into the sea...He whispers to the heart, 'Be still and know that I am within you.'"

When the disciples of Jesus meet him after his crucifixion they are terrified, thinking he is a ghost. Jesus says, "Peace be with you."

The familiar statue of the Buddha with his right hand raised in a gesture of "stop" and his left resting at the level of the solar plexus, is the *mudra*, the hand gesture that signifies, "Fear Not."

**None of these teachers invited their students into a state of self-soothing escape -- but rather they exhorted their followers to begin their practice of building a sustainable, just life with a state of calm, fearlessness in the face of annihilation. This is the only path to consciousness.**

When I see the face of our president on television, I see the face of the primitive fear system and I see with the eyes of the primitive fear system. My body recognizes that this man is haunted at night by the demons of fear. Like the boy in Anne's story, we can see in our nation's leader a favorite son with a good job and plenty of food, and yet with each day his eyes grow larger, his pupils become smaller, his shoulders get closer to his ears, the pitch of his voice goes higher, the crease of his brow grows deeper.

If we are paying attention then we have to know that we are being led by a person who is caught in the primitive fear system. Recognizing that reality is very frightening to a herd animal, which is what we are. What shall we do with that knowledge of his fear?

If we respond with our own primitive fear system, our pupils will narrow, our faces will turn pale, our fingers will point, and we will spend our days blaming. Our stance of self-righteous hate does and will continue to increase the primitive fear in those we judge. The amplification of fear and violence and paralysis will continue to be fueled by mutual unconsciousness.

This is the time for taking the exhortation of our spiritual ancestors seriously, "Be still...Fear not...choose life...peace be with you."

I finish with the words of the Dalai Lama, written to the people of the United States after the attacks of 9/11. I heard these words for the first time when I was in state of incredible fear and yet required to lead a congregation as well as stand before the people of the larger community. Like a terrified child on the lap of a very good parent, I listened to this teacher's voice because I knew that my life depended upon my understanding. This is still true today:

*"The message we hear from all sources of truth is clear: We are all one. That is a message the human race has largely ignored. Forgetting this truth is the only cause of hatred and war, and the way to remember is simple: Love, [in] this and every moment.*

*If we could love even those who have attacked us, and seek to understand why they have done so, what then would be our response? Yet if we meet negativity with negativity, rage with rage, attack with attack, what then will be the outcome?*

*These are the questions that are placed before the human race today. They are questions that we have failed to answer for thousands of years. Failure to answer them now could eliminate the need to answer them at all. If we want the beauty of the world that we have co-created to be experienced by our children and our children's children, . . . We must choose to be a cause in the matter....*

*Today the human soul asks the question: What can I do to preserve the beauty and the wonder of our world and to eliminate the anger and hatred—and the disparity that inevitably causes it—in that part of the world which I touch? . . .*

*A central teaching in most spiritual traditions is: What you wish to experience, provide for another.*

*Look to see, now, what it is you wish to experience—in your own life, and in the world. Then see if there is another for whom you may be the source of that.*

*If you wish to experience peace, provide peace for another. If you wish to know that you are safe, cause [others] to know that they are safe. If you wish to better understand seemingly incomprehensible things, help another to better understand. If you wish to heal your own sadness or anger, seek to heal the sadness or anger of another.*

*Those others are waiting for you now. They are looking to you for guidance, for help, for courage, for strength, for understanding, and for assurance at this hour. Most of all, they are looking to you for love.”*

**I invite us to be a people who know how to find a stillness out of which we are able to pray for our leaders, not because we are afraid, but because we know that we are all connected.**

May our singing be a prayer for peace for ourselves and all beings.

May our singing be joined by the voices of our ancestors—the people who taught us how to name our fears and love boldly.

May our experience in the here and now teach us that nothing can separate us from the love at the heart of the universe.

May it ever be so.