

FREEDOM FROM FEAR

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH

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Reading

First Lesson by Philip Booth

Lie back daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

Sermon

Whenever I get on an airplane, I take stock of my life. What if I die today on this plane? How attached am I to my life? Could I die today at peace, knowing I've done what I could, letting go of what I couldn't? Sometimes the answer is actually yes, far more often no. I am indeed attached to my life. I don't want my niece and nephews to lose their Auntie Dana. I've really just begun my ministry, and I have still more to do. I see yet more love and hope and possibility to embrace. Yet I am rarely abjectly terrified at the thought of my death. I've done good work and loved well most of the time. I've made human connection, made a difference in lives, done little permanent damage.

The antecedents to this spiritual check-in go way back. When I was a child I adored flying. I was first on a plane when I was still an infant. Less common in 1958 than today. Before I turned six, I had literally flown around the world. My father was transferred to Australia when I was 3. We flew down via California and Hawaii, and when we returned two years later, we came back round the other way. Through Thailand, Greece, Rome and London. While I have lamented since that my grand tour of the world came when I was five, I loved to brag about my travels. When I came home crying one day because my kindergarten classmates didn't believe me, my mother called my teacher to confirm that I was not telling tales. I had indeed circumnavigated the globe.

As I said, I loved everything about flying. Dressing up for the flight. The pretty stewardesses. The nifty compact plastic trays of food. The equally compact bathrooms. My first career ambition was to be a stewardess, which by no means thrilled my parents.

So it came as quite a surprise when I developed a fear of flying when I was about 30. On a six-week trip to Europe – the one I never managed to take after college – I ended up taking far more planes between places than trains – and I was utterly terrified at each flight. I didn't sleep for days before. When I finally landed safely back home, I wanted to kiss the ground with relief.

The fear stayed with me for several years. And I even began to be fearful of crossing bridges. I'm not entirely sure how I talked myself back from this nascent agoraphobia, but my life check-in before every flight was part of the process.

When Don told me of his relationship with fear – that he is more afraid of the things he can control than those he cannot – it was counterintuitive to me. I think his attitude is actually far more rational than mine. Perhaps his love of mathematics

makes statistics more real for him – more real and more comforting. For in fact we are much safer in airplanes than we are in cars. Don puts more trust in well-trained professionals than he does in himself, and that makes some real sense. And I know that control of any sort is really an illusion. Yet I feel far safer when I have my hands on the wheel, than when I'm flying. If something goes wrong at 30,000 feet, there is little I can do about it. When something goes wrong, here on the ground, I may just be able to steer around it.

As Helen Keller said, security is mostly superstition, but it's one I'm attached to.

This is a profoundly religious question for it has to do with where we put our trust. Don, through a spiritual practice of mathematics, has found a way to trust others. He has a clear picture of what he controls and what he does not. And he surrenders to both. I, on the other hand, apparently have more trust in myself, which is really a grand illusion. Hence my own practice while flying. How is it with my soul? How willing am I to surrender?

I speak to you today of fear because these are such fearful times. The outcome of the election is uncertain, and many – people who favor both candidates – have very strong feelings about its outcome. Lately I have been hearing people speak about either candidates' election in the language of fear. As in, I am scared to death that _____ will be elected.

And the economy is just plain so not good, and we don't know how much worse it will get. Until recently, I never fully understood Franklin Roosevelt's statement that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Suddenly it makes perfect sense.

Now, it was a long Puritan tradition that the minister preached an election sermon on the Sunday before the presidential election. The minister would preach for as long as two hours and let loose his opinion of the candidates and the state of the world and the state of all our souls.

I just couldn't bring myself to preach the modern version of the old Election Sermon on this day. In Puritan times, the campaign didn't last nearly two years, and people weren't bombarded with so much information. There were newspapers of course – and political discourse at least as negative and nasty as it is today – but elections didn't take up the mental and emotional time and space in people's lives.

Nevertheless, this is a time of anxiety and uncertainty, and so I turn once again to Rev. Forrest Church who spoke recently on Security, Liberty and Freedom from Fear. Forrest told us, as usual, to look to love.

"Fear is as contagious as it can be toxic. That is why it is such an effective political tool. Yet only when our fear lifts can the human heart open and thrive. The opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is fear.

"Think for a moment about love. It certainly doesn't offer security. Every time we give our heart away, we risk having it dashed to pieces. Love is grief's advance party. Fear promises a safer path: refuse to give away your heart and it will never be broken, either by deceit or loss. And it is true, armored hearts are invulnerable. We can eliminate a world of trouble from our lives simply by closing our hearts. Yet the trouble from which we are liberating ourselves is necessary trouble. We need it as we need breath. Since the most precious and enduring lifework is signed by love, to avoid the risk of love is to cower from life's only perfect promise....

As Helen Keller told us, security is superstition and we should instead embrace risk of the adventure.

As a historian, Forrest Church gathers hope from Franklin Roosevelt.

"History shows we can be liberated from fear, even in the darkest of times," Forrest says. "Roosevelt proved that, shepherding the nation as an unanxious presence through its most perilous trial since the civil war. He was far from perfect, missing the [balance] between security and liberty time and again, but he led by faith not fear, which in this imperfect world makes all the difference."

Facing fear was a theme throughout Roosevelt's presidency. The bit about fear itself was from his first inaugural address when he spoke to a truly terrified nation. In early 1941, with war raging in Europe but still an ocean away from us, he delivered his Four Freedoms speech as his state of the union address. In essence he was preparing a reluctant nation to face their fears once again, knowing that America would have to enter another World War.

His words seem remarkably contemporary. In January 1941, he told Congress and the nation,

"In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The first is freedom of speech and expression -- everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way -- everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want, which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants -- everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear, which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor -- anywhere in the world."

In this speech, Roosevelt was beginning to name a list of universal human rights, and he claimed them, not just for Americans, but for all people everywhere in the world.

Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear. How radical for his day. How radical for us even now. For today, all four of those freedoms are being abrogated in one way or another in the name of security. We are told that we need security, not freedom from fear. And those are two very different things. The desire for security is a response to fear. It is not a path to freedom from it.

Roosevelt lead from faith and not from fear. How can we still use his example? How can we live in love, which is the opposite of fear? What does our faith teach us and hold us to in such fearful times?

Unitarian Universalism, which is a covenantal and not creedal, blessedly shows us a way. For the center of our faith is not a creed, not a statement of right belief. Rather, at the center of our faith is a covenant a promise to one another. A promise to be together, to walk together in love.

A covenant is a relationship among equals. It carries us to a place of obligation and responsibility to one another, not the rightness of a creed or belief. It is deeper than the ebb and flow of human emotion and circumstance. We place our faith in each other because we see in each other what Channing called the Likeness to God. An orthodox belief is static and has us looking ever to the past. Faith in Covenantal Community brings us to the present among ourselves and together we can look to a hopeful future.

Covenant is a bond among us.

Rev. Brent Smith puts it this way, "Covenant is a concept taken from the various agreements we make everyday, from the willingness to kneel in prayer with someone we don't know all that well, to the life partner we've chosen for better or worse, to the teacher to whom we entrust our child, to the boss or co-worker or employee we supervise. Agreements are ordinary things. But to us, certain kinds of agreements unlock sacred and holy dimensions to this life when their roots are in the expanse of human affection and their branches bud into the virtues of freedom. Or, as 20th century Unitarian minister Napoleon Lovely wrote, "The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom."

A covenant among us leads to trust one another, and that trust gives us breathing space, a kind of freedom. In that freedom we can feel the safety to risk and that allows us, even encourages us to grow spiritually.

One of the ways we can face our fears is to show up and be in this kind of covenantal relationship with one another, knowing that we are not alone. We would be and can be one. We can trust and rely on one another. Such trust is not something that arises in all our relationships. We don't always get it right here in this covenantal community. But the promise upon which this church is based is the starting point. It actually requires something of you. It asks something of you, but when given, in return you gain a freedom based on the bonds of that love.

We must not let fear keep us from living because it keeps us from risking love.

Love is perhaps the greatest risk and the greatest adventure.

You gain a kind of security. Not that necessarily that everything will be ok, but that we are in this together.