

WHEN FEAR ENTERS IN

Marilyn Sewell

Things were different, not so fearful, when I grew up in a little N. Louisiana town in the '50's. Oh, it's not that we didn't have anything to be afraid of. We knew that a nuclear bomb could be dropped on us. But we addressed that fear. People built bomb shelters in their back yards, where they planned to stay, eating cans of Vienna sausage and Ritz crackers, until the radiation died down. At school we learned to protect ourselves from a nuclear blast by crouching under our desks--though truthfully nobody thought our town would be important enough to bomb.

We didn't lock our doors, except at night, and then with flimsy hinges, not deadbolts. Hobos would drift by occasionally, and the custom was to carry out a large plate of food to them, that they might not have to continue on their way hungry. At school students might be reprimanded for chewing gum—but no one ever expected anyone to be carrying a gun. We had never even heard of drugs, and the first alcohol that passed my lips came when I was in graduate school.

Yes, things are different now. Our lives are saturated with fear. When we pick up the morning paper, we read headlines like the following: "Price of Oil Climbs"; "Pentagon says It May Need to Call up More Reservists; Bomb in Baghdad Misses Humvees, Blasts 2 Iraqi Buses"; "Poverty on the Rise.." We learn about social programs being cut, so that more

money can be spent on the reconstruction of Iraq, after we first of course spent billions destroying the infrastructure of Iraq. I've heard many people say, "You know, I'm having to take a break from the news. I just can't handle it anymore.

It's not surprising that anxiety disorders are the biggest mental health problem in this country, with over 25,000,000 people being affected. And then there are the phobias—which are kind of displaced fears. We are afraid of all kinds of things. In checking out phobias, I found that there are over 500 named phobias. I thought I would share some of these with you this morning:

--Alliumphobia—fear of garlic. Such a person trembles when he walks past an Italian restaurant, and of course forgoes the best protection against vampires.

--Anthrophobia—fear of flowers. ("No, no, Edgar, it's a giant rhododendron!")

--Arachibutyrophobia—fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth

--Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia—fear of long words

Fear is our most primal emotion. It's about survival. Intense fear take precedence over our desire for food, sex, water, or anything else besides attending to what frightens us. Our reproductive system, digestive system, and all other secondary systems shut down as our brain takes us into the flight or fight syndrome.

Fear leads to anger. I discovered this one summer day when I was reading, with my window open, and a bee came buzzing in. I said to myself, "Let the bee alone. After all, you

can share your space with one of God's little creatures. Then another bee came, and another. I remained quite still and read my book, while they buzzed lazily around. I was cool. I was sharing. And then it happened—a bee stung me. I changed from a peace-loving tree hugger into a killer. I got the fly swat and went after them. Whap, whap, whap! I went. The only good bee is a dead bee, I said to myself.

We each have our own fears, but we in this country live with an overlay of fear, we live in a culture of fear. Maybe this accounts for the strained looks on our faces. Maybe it accounts for the road rage we see all too often. Michael Moore, in his funny and yet deeply moving documentary film *Bowling at Columbine*, sets out to explain why we have so many deaths by guns in this country. Before seeing the film, I guessed that he would lay it to gun control—that he would say we had all these deaths because so many people have guns, and the regulations for ownership are so weak. But he didn't. He explained that Canadians actually have more guns per capita than we do, but they have a tiny fraction of the gun deaths we have. He found that Canadians do not lock their doors--that they do not live in the climate of fear that we do. Moore points out that Canadians do not have news stories as we do, night after night on TV, showing violence. Our news rooms say "if it bleeds, it leads," and they look for violence wherever it may be found. Between 1990 and 1998, the nation's murder rate declined by 20 per cent, while the number of murder stories on net work newscasts increased 600 per cent.¹ After a steady diet of this, we become anxious—chronically anxious—and angry. We buy more guns and learn to use them. We live in gated communities. We put a larger

¹Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear*.

proportion of our population in prison than any other country in the world. Are our fears logical? No, though crime has actually gone down, our anxiety about crime has gone up. How many new colleges have we built in Oregon recently? How many prisons?

Our fears do not always make sense. Think about some common fears--think about the airplane VS the automobile—which causes us more anxiety? For most of us, the airplane, but we are actually mile for mile, 37 times more likely to die in a car crash than on a commercial flight. What about great white shark attacks? Great whites have claimed only around 70 lives worldwide, since 1896. But after watching *Jaws* and reading vivid accounts of a few shark attacks, we are terrified to swim in the ocean. Actually, after I saw *Jaws*, I was scared even in swimming pools.

Consider now terrorist attacks. The Oklahoma City bombing was horrible—by the end of that week, we learned that 19 children had been killed. I still have on my refrigerator door that tender, terrible picture of the fireman carrying out the tiny child in his big arms. But that same week, 70 children died at the hands of a parent, and most of them were under five.

The horror on 9/11, 2001, is forever etched in our minds, as we saw the world trade center towers collapse again and again on TV. We have read the stories of the ones who died. We now know that we are vulnerable to such attacks, and we are right to be cautious. But your chances of being killed in a terrorist attack are exceedingly small—one statistician says about one in 100,000.

I am concerned that the present administration has played upon our fears in order to gain support for the attack on Iraq, a country that had not threatened to attack us, and indeed did not have the means to do so. Even when addressing the United Nations this past week, Bush began his speech with a recounting of the events of 9/11. He is still playing on that. He has cleverly conflated the terrorist attacks with the evils of Saddam Hussein's regime. At the present, 67% of the American people believe that Saddam Hussein was involved in the terrorist attacks, when there is actually no evidence for that at all. Bush told us that he had proof that the Iraqis had "weapons of mass destruction," but no such weapons have ever been found. It is very disturbing to me that our President has lied to us and has frightened citizens in order to gain political and control. Our soldiers, mostly very young men, continue to die, and who knows how many thousands of Iraqis have been killed and will be killed. We now have the Patriot Act, which under the guise of protecting citizens, is stripping away our civil rights and is being used to investigate all kinds of crimes, as well as to punish dissenters, even environmentalists. We have code yellow and code orange alerts, but we never find out what they are for. We don't know how to prepare, except to get extra duct tape. I believe their purpose is to keep the electorate in a state of fear.

I don't know about you, but I'm not afraid of terrorist attacks. I am afraid of this administration's "protecting our freedom" by turning this country into a surveillance state. The government now can track the library books we check out, the medicines we take, our psychiatric records, and the political and church groups we join. There are No-Fly lists at

airports, not just for terrorist suspects, but also for people who dissent. I'm afraid because our allies mistrust and dislike us, and see us as a bully nation, building an empire. I'm afraid that Iraq is becoming the Jihad center of the world. And I'm afraid when I see our school systems crumbling, environmental protections done away with, and the deficit going sky-high. No, I'm not afraid of terrorist attacks—I'm afraid of President Bush and his autocratic advisors..

I want to move now to the more personal. When we have something we fear, we either move away from it, or we move through it and learn—and sometimes transform ourselves and those around us. I visited with my sister this summer in Alabama, and we took a couple of days to do a kind of Civil Rights tour of that state. One of the most moving things we did was to see the new Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery. You actually go into a darkened room, and you see a real bus, and then film is projected on the windows and doors, and it is as if you see the interior and the events that occurred there, as they occurred. Seeing the angry stares of the whites, the fear and indecision on the faces of the Blacks, the confrontation with the driver and then the police—all this took me right into the scene.

Once a graduate student is supposed to have asked Rosa Parks, “Why did you sit down at the front of the bus that day?” She did not answer, “I sat down to start the Civil Rights movement.” No, her answer was much more elemental. She said, “I sat down because I was tired.” She meant not just her body was tired, but her soul, her whole being was tired. She was tired of being treated as an inferior, tired of degrading racist rules.² Was she frightened?

²Rosa Parks, *Rosa Parks: My Story*. New York: Dial Books, 1992, p. 116.

How could she not have been? She could have been beaten, possibly even killed, for such defiance. The only thing more frightening to her than sitting down was not sitting down, and letting herself and her people have their lives continue to be constrained by racism. She didn't know that she would start a movement that day. She just knew that she had to claim her life, her birthright, as a human being. The bus driver, failing to budge her, called the police. They came, and said to her, "You know, if you continue to sit there, we'll have to throw you in jail." She sat, upright, dignified, and simply said, "You may do that" What could a stone and steel jail have done to her, that the jailing of her spirit hadn't already done?

We may fear becoming our true self, our integrated, undivided self, because in our strength, we think we may be rejected, punished, in some way by others. And we may. People don't like it when somebody rocks the boat. But what does that compare to the punishment of living a false life, a divided self, with a front we show to others, the authentic self held safely within? What do others' opinions compare to the tragedy of a life unrealized, like a sleek boat, made for the sea, but one that never sails out of the safety of the harbor?

I remember when I was a graduate student, getting my Master's in English literature—the head of the department came to me one day and said, "Marilyn, why don't you stay on, and get your doctorate? I'll give you a full scholarship," he said. I was taken aback. *Me, a Ph.D.?* I said to him, "No, I'm already over-educated for a woman. If I get a Ph.D., I'll never get married." Well, I got married. It was 30 years later that I got the Ph.D. Have I learned to get beyond fear now? No, not at all. I came to this church as your minister 12

years ago, having never had a called ministry. It was a large church, even then. You took a chance on this new minister, and I said “yes.” I knew that I could do this job only if the Holy Spirit was partnered with me—only if this was my call. I’ve made mistakes during these 12 years, Lord knows, and I continue to make mistakes, but I know beyond a doubt, two things: I know that this is a great church with a great mission, and I cling to that mission, and I know I’m called to be with you. I’m trusting that my God will see me through.

For years I have had on my desk at the church a post card that someone sent me. I keep it for inspiration. On it is a picture of Audre Lorde, the Black lesbian poet who broke rules right and left. She has on colorful blue and purple robes, and her arms are raised, her fingers spread. She is smiling, and her eyes are saying, “Here I stand. I can be no other.” A few of her words are printed at the top of the card, and they say this: “When I dare to be powerful—to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”

“When I dare to be powerful” We pull back from our own power, our own goodness, and we say, “Who am I to do that? I am not worthy.” The *Bible* is full of stories of people who thought they were not good enough. Mary, who is to become the mother of Jesus; Moses, who is told by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Mary said, “Who, me? I don’t even have a husband!” And Moses said, “Send my brother Aaron—he’s a much better public speaker.” Why is it that we deny our power, that we project our goodness onto others? Is it because if we try, we might fail? Or life might take a direction that we think we don’t want?

Let me say this: the Holy One wants nothing more than your happiness. Not the temporary happiness that you get when you buy a new—whatever, dress or gas bar-b-que. But rather God wants your deep contentment. Yes, you may be led down a hard path, or not, but whatever it is, it will be your path, and that will bring a peace that can come no other way.

Will you have fears? Of course! Will you have the courage to do what you need to do anyway? Yes, you will. I have a promise to give to you this morning. If you are willing to be used for the good, if you are willing to give yourself away and put your ego on the back burner, then you can trust that the way will open before you. And all will be well. All manner of things will be well. So be it. Amen.

PRAYER

We confess, Holy One, that our fears often drive us to unworthy thoughts and behaviors. We ask this morning that we might be forgiven for this misuse of our power. May we entrust those fears to you, so they will not weigh so heavily upon us. Help us not to be afraid of our strength and goodness, but to step out in faith when a challenge rises before us. Be with us, Holy One, and give us the courage we need in these difficult and troubling times. Let your love shine through even our beleaguered hearts. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Fear not, for the Spirit of Life will guide you, and will hold you, all the days of your life.

CALL TO WORSHIP

We come together this day
to be reminded of the best that is within us,
to remember who we are,
and what we yet can be.

Come, let us worship together.