

Lions & Tigers & Bears, Oh My!¹
Rev. Myke Johnson, February 22, 2009
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

We live in times that provoke uncertainty and fear. Every day on the news we hear about the failing economy, and rising unemployment, and more homes going into foreclosure. And it isn't just far off news—people within our own circle of family and friends have lost jobs, or have seen their retirement savings plummet, and are wondering how they will survive the storm. If these very immediate dangers aren't enough, on a larger scale, we see the dangers facing our planet. Will climate change destroy our environment? Will Portland drown in rising sea levels? Will we run out of oil or fail to find new energy sources? Will our children be able to survive and flourish in future times?

Fear is all around us. I heard a joke the other day about two people who stopped each other on the street, to talk about the state of their businesses. One said, "You sure look worried." "Whoa," said the other, "I've got so many troubles that if anything happens today, it will be at least two weeks before I can worry about it."

So I ask myself: How can we deal with our fear? How can we keep our eyes open, recognize true dangers, but not succumb to the paralysis of worry, or be manipulated into bad decisions? How can we live with meaning and courage in the midst of hard times? What do our faith and our values offer us for hard times?

In thinking about these questions, the first image that came to my mind was from the story of the Wizard of Oz. I remembered Dorothy and the Scarecrow and the Tin Man, about to enter the dark forest, talking about fear. Dorothy says, "I don't like this forest. It's dark and creepy...Do you suppose we'll meet any wild animals?" The Tin Man answers, "Perhaps." The Scarecrow jumps in, "Even ones that, that eat... straw?" And the Tin Man replies, "Some, but mostly lions and tigers and bears." Lions? And tigers? And bears. Oh my! And then they march forward, chanting faster and faster, almost working themselves into a frenzy: Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!

I went back to the story, to see what it might have to teach us about dealing with fear. The movie is actually quite scary, especially if you are a little kid. There are tornados, and wicked witches, and flying monkeys, and death threats. But there is a lot of courage too.

In the very beginning of the story, Dorothy is trying to save her dog Toto from the mean old neighbor who plots to take him away and kill him. Because she ventures away from home, she gets swept up by the tornado. She lands in a very strange place, and doesn't know how to get back. One might say that all of us have also landed in a strange place. There are issues we face as a people that we haven't faced before. There are new forms of communication that just forty years ago would have seemed like magic. But there are also new threats to our safety and well-being—environmental hazards and social hazards, conflict abroad and at home. We have more possibilities for world community, and also more risk for world disaster.

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The munchkins and the good witch send Dorothy and Toto off on the journey down the yellow brick road to search for the Wizard who should be able to help her. On the way she meets three companions who are also searching for something they lack—a brain, a heart, and courage. But in the end, they each learn that the qualities they thought they lacked were inside them all along. They discover their wisdom, love and courage in the struggle against the dangers on their journey—all the wizard really does is point them out.

I was especially curious about the lion, since he is looking for courage. When the companions first encounter him in the woods, he is full of bravado, and boasts about fighting them. But one tiny slap on the nose from Dorothy reveals his cowardice. Courage, it seems to him, is like a magical quality that will change everything, and enable him to be the king of the forest. All he can feel is his fear. But later, when Dorothy is captured by the wicked witch, he finds the strength to counter his fear. He says, "I'll go in there for Dorothy. Wicked Witch or no Wicked Witch. Guards or no guards, I'll tear 'em apart. I may not come out alive, but I'm goin' in there. There's only one thing I want you fellas to do...Talk me out of it."

He hasn't lost his fear, but his love and loyalty are larger than his fear, and that creates courage. He couldn't find it just for himself, but he could find it for his friend Dorothy. In the end, the wizard doesn't give him courage—only a medal—a reminder of his own power to be a hero.

So the lion teaches me that we don't need to overcome or get rid of our fear, we need to find a way to contain our fear. And what can be a container for our fear? Something that is larger than our fear. Our love for a dear one, our values, our passion for justice, our curiosity, our circle of companions, our trust in the divine—all of these can help us to make a container for our fear, and thus have the courage to move forward on the journey. Dorothy found courage in protecting her beloved dog Toto, in finding friends with whom to travel, in her sense of fairness and her anger at bullying, and finally in the love she knew that her auntie Em held for her.

Think about fear in your own life journey. How did you learn courage in the face of fear? What helped you make a container for your fears?

James Bremner writes, "I was afraid of the night as a child. There was no reason to fear. In a tiny village in western Scotland 50 years ago there was nothing to fear. ...But there was an excuse for my fear. ...there were no street or porch lights, and every window was heavily draped against the damp chill: The dark was absolute."

He goes on to say, "I wonder sometimes how modern children, constantly bathed in light, can ever learn courage. They seem to have very few opportunities to practice since they are surrounded at all times with painstaking precaution and have their way lit constantly, day and night. ...Courage, which is no more than the management of fear, must be practiced. For this, children need a widespread, easily obtained, cheap, renewable source of something scary but not actually dangerous."²

² James Bremner, "Fear of the Night," published in *Let There Be Night: Testimony on Behalf of the Dark*, edited by Paul Bogard, excerpted in *Utne Reader*, Jan-Feb '09, p. 43.

He calls courage the “management of fear.” I remember times in my life when I practiced managing my fear. During my third year of study at Chicago Theological Seminary, I lived in the far north of Chicago, and had to ride the elevated train down to Hyde Park on the South Side where the school was located. I was living in an apartment with a fellow student, another woman, and we had an eight block walk to the train. During the day that was fine, but when I came home late at night, it was scary.

There was a bigger context for this—during my first years of seminary, I had been married. During that time, I also rode the train, but if I came home late, I could just call up my partner and he’d walk to the station to pick me up. He and I both knew that women faced more dangers from the urban streets, so it was natural to feel safer with him by my side. He was happy to help out. But I was on my own now. The streets hadn’t changed—there was still the same level of risk, but what options did I have?

It was my roommate who helped me find courage. She walked home from the train alone, so I began to feel that I could too. It wasn’t comfortable at first, but each time I did it, I felt more confidence. I gained courage from the example of courage I saw in my friend. And this practice of walking alone from the train, also fed my courage as I faced a new life as a single woman.

The other thing that gave me courage was a support group for divorced and separated students. We were all setting out on journeys into the unknown, and this circle of companions helped us contain our fears, and embrace our new lives.

Eleanor Roosevelt is reputed to have said, “Do one thing every day that scares you.” We learn courage, we learn to contain and manage our fear, by stepping toward our fear. Fear is a natural instinct, an emotion that gets activated by risk of danger. Fear is helpful to our survival. If we were oblivious to danger, we would more likely fall victim to it. Fear helps us to be attentive, alert, and energized. When we can manage our fear, we can use that energy to accomplish our goals. In this way, fear can be a positive influence for us, as we grow in strength and are able to face larger and deeper challenges.

But fear can also be a negative influence. Fear has often been manipulated by those in power to exert control over large groups of people. Fear is used to lead people into war, to scapegoat those we see as different for our troubles, to lure us into giving up civil liberties in exchange for an elusive security. Fear can be easily misdirected. Our subconscious minds are quick to recoil from threats that are vividly called to mind. So when we see news reports of terrorist plane crashes, child abductions, and disease-causing bacteria, we inflate those dangers beyond their actual level of risk, and make bad decisions that end up hurting us.

Journalist Daniel Gardiner pointed out that in the 12 months after 9/11, a large number of people avoided flying, and traveled instead in cars. Flying, however, is actually much safer than driving. In that one year, traffic fatalities increased, and an additional 1595 people lost their lives. Because the threat of death in airplanes was more visible, people made choices that ignored the actual levels of danger.³

³ Cited in Julie Hanus, “Fear Itself,” in *Utne Reader*, Jan-Feb ’09, p.39.

Another example can be found in the marketing of anti-bacterial products. Four years ago, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration concluded that anti-bacterial soap is no better at preventing infection than regular soap. In fact, anti-bacterial products increase the drug resistance of common germs—which is a real danger. But there are now thousands of anti-bacterial products being sold to a public afraid of germs; sales in 2009 are expected to reach \$930 million.⁴ Even though I know better, and would never buy anti-bacterial products for our home, I remember during a recent hospital visit, feeling vaguely reassured as I washed my hands with the anti-bacterial soap in the hospital hallway. (Note—someone told me hospitals have stopped using anti-bacterials.)

Fear is useful when it helps us to activate our common sense to evaluate dangers. But following our gut reactions without thought can lead us into greater dangers. Fear is more useful as an advisor than it is as a ruler.

After the pals in Oz have returned from their misadventure with the witch, after they discover that the Wizard is really just a small man behind the curtain, he tells them the story of how his balloon took him away from a Kansas fair and into the Land of Oz. Dorothy asks: Weren't you frightened? He replies, "Frightened? Child, you're talking to a man who's laughed in the face of death, sneered at doom, and chuckled at catastrophe... I was petrified."

Change always creates a measure of fear in us. Life brings new challenges in good times and in bad times. When we let our fear control us, we become victims to our fear, and lose our capacity for clear thinking, compassion, and courage. But if we hold on to larger values, and to other people who share our values, we can walk with our fear, recognizing it, learning from it, but going forward on our journeys.

Earlier this month, I read a story of true courage in the face of danger. I found it in the Portland Press Herald, in a column by Leonard Pitts.⁵

Shamsia was walking with her sister when a man on a motorcycle pulled abreast of them. "Are you going to school?" he asked. She was. And this was, by definition, an incendiary act in Kandahar, Afghanistan, where the Taliban is making a comeback... What happened next was monstrous. ...the man lifted the girl's burqa, [and sprayed] her face... with acid. In all, 15 girls and their teachers at the Mirwais School for Girls were targeted by six men...

Shamsia Husseini got it the worst, ... [and] was left with jagged scars on her face and her vision was damaged.

The story could have ended there, a tragic tale of brutal oppression. But the schoolmaster reached out to the community and parents, and the wounded girls went back to school, despite everything. Even more remarkable, nearly every female student in the community—about 1,300 in all—returned to school. Shamsia told *New York Times* reporter Dexter Filkins, "My parents told me to keep coming to school even if I am killed. The people who did this to me don't want women to be educated. They want us to be stupid things."⁶

⁴ Ibid., p. 39-40, citing a *Mother Jones* magazine article.

⁵ *Portland Press Herald*, Feb 4, 2009, p. A7.

⁶ See original New York Times article, with photos at http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/14/world/asia/14kandahar.html?_r=1

One person's courage inspires more courage in everyone who hears their story. That is why we love the stories of heroes. That is why if we can't be the first one to stand up, when justice demands it, it is still important to be the second or third or five hundredth to stand up, to stand together, after the first one has taken the risk.

It is easy to take our values for granted, in a place of comfort. It is easy to take for granted the possibility to gather together with others of like mind, the ability to go to school and learn about the world. It is easy to take for granted the right to choose a career, to save money and have a home. When these things are at risk, fear can help us to wake up and realize how much we value them. When our income is threatened, fear helps us to think about what is most important to us—what do we really need to thrive?

There are real dangers in our economic world, in our environment. We can let our fears immobilize us and isolate us, or we can use our fear to bring us home to our deepest values. It took a long and winding journey for Dorothy to be able to understand what home meant to her. Once she understood, she had the power to go home. When we know what our deepest values are, we have the power to make a home in them, and they become a container large enough to hold our fears. Then we discover the courage to take the journey into the unknown future.

There may be changes we need to make. There may be challenges, but we know what we are made of. We know what we are looking for. And then, even when we face dark woods and dangerous opponents, the journey becomes an adventure, a yellow brick road of growth and strength, and friendship and learning.
May it be so.

Closing Words

In the words of Wendell Berry,⁷

It may be that when we no longer know what to do,
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go,
we have begun our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.

Our reading today was the poem, Walking,⁸ by Linda Hogan. It begins:

Walking on the road one night
my granddaughter says,
Grandma, are you afraid?

⁷ "The Real Work," in *Collected Poems*, quoted in many places online.

⁸ The complete poem can be found in Linda Hogan, *Rounding the Human Corners*