

## Fear Itself

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We are living in uncertain times.

Consumer confidence is plummeting, and our spending is following it. (Kinsley) From cars to coffee and clothing to computers, American consumers are buying less and less. The data released this week by the Commerce Department showed the largest drop in retail sales in the history of such records being kept—4.1 percent lower than last year and almost 3 percent lower than last month. (Healy)

This week's newspaper read like a horror novel—unemployment is up, Europe is officially in a recession, and only Wal-Mart is managing to make a profit (and then even barely so).

Whether we have enough money or not, we feel like we don't. Six months ago, some of us could barely afford to fill our gas tanks. Now, we still wince at the prices that have half of what they were.

Whether we have job security or not, we feel like we don't. Every journalist I know keeps track of the daily announcements of layoffs in their field—even if they work in a fairly safe place.

Teachers and nurses cringe when the governor warns of looming budget deficits, sure that the next round of education and health care cuts mean certain doom.

And yes, even ministers shudder at every bit of economic news—I have more than one friend whose position or salary has been cut because of declining giving.

I say this not to evoke your reassurances, or to guilt you into giving more to the Fellowship, but to let you know that I feel the fear myself, even though I'm pretty sure I have little to be afraid of.

In particularly uncertain times for our families and our nation, it is natural to be gripped with fear.

And fear makes us act and react in ways that are not always healthy or conducive to building relationships with others.

Fear makes people do things against their better judgment.

It causes us to make snap decisions and agree to things that we wouldn't agree to if we were thinking clearly. It causes us to entertain notions of hatred—thoughts that we would easily dismiss if we were not afraid.

Religions and politicians have both learned to take advantage of fear to manipulate people.

Religions use the fear of eternal damnation to direct people's behaviors in all sorts of ways; they use the fear of being outcast and excommunicated, holding it over those who might otherwise support choice and equal rights.

Yesterday, I joined people all around our nation in protesting for marriage equality. I was thrilled to be joined by other members of our Fellowship on the steps of the White Plains City Hall in the drizzle.

In New York, our protests were also aimed at our state government, but the protests nationwide were sparked by California's recent vote to add discrimination to their state constitution and to overturn recently-enacted marriage equality there.

Proposition 8, the ballot initiative that did this, was passed because of intense contributions from religious conservatives who used fear as their primary weapon. Fear of the unknown. Fear of difference. Fear of religious discrimination, even.

Advertisements asking people to vote for the proposition cited a completely-imagined scenario under which evangelical Christian, Catholic and Mormon churches would lose their tax-exempt status if the proposition failed. (McKinley and Johnson) Lies were used to create fear, knowing that fear itself was the best motivation for hate.

Politicians, too, have learned to take advantage of fear—the fear of violence and terrorism has been used since 2001 to let our government get away with chipping away at our civil liberties, perpetuating violence in our world, and torturing people in our country's name.

Americans have been politically powerless to stop it as long as we've been afraid.

And the fears that come with economic uncertainty make us all vulnerable to being manipulated by those in power.

Already, these fears have led to Congress capitulating on spending seven hundred billion dollars to stop banks and brokerage firms that took unjustifiable risks from failing. What are the things that will be asked of us next?

If we persist in being afraid, I shudder to think.

Fear also makes people angry and defensive.

Economic insecurity often makes people react to things in ways that are not helpful.

I'll give you an example from this week.

In June, delegates to the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly chose, as is our custom, an issue that congregations will be asked to spend some time thinking about and studying over the next few years.

It's called the Study-Action Issue, and this year's is called Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice.

We'll talk more about the issue itself, but arriving in mailboxes this week is the winter edition of the *UUWorld* magazine, for which my friend and colleague the Rev. John Gibb Millspaugh was asked to write about ethical eating at Thanksgiving.

John set out to compare prices of food with different sources. Butterball Turkey vs. free-range, organic turkeys vs. tofurkey. Organic cranberries vs. conventional ones. You get the picture.

In the end, he concluded that eating things that were better for the Earth and for the animals involved was significantly more expensive than doing otherwise. That free-range, organic turkey is three times the price of the Butterball (and, as some have pointed out, twenty times the price of the supermarket coupon special no-name frozen bird).

This, I believe we are supposed to surmise, becomes a matter of economic justice: making ethical choices in what we eat is out of the realm of possible for so many.

Sure, his article is not perfect. But the reaction among many people whose opinions I normally hold in high regard has been outrageous.

"How dare he," people have written, "imply that because I can't afford the free-range, organic turkey somehow I'm not eating ethically."

"Our religion will never grow," sighed another, implying that a religion that talked about ethical eating in terms of choices in what we eat could not possibly connect with working-class people.

Of course, John didn't write either of those things. In fact, as one of the people who was invited to help write our Association's resource guide on the subject, I can tell you that economic justice issues are at the forefront of how we're asking congregations to engage with this subject.

But when people are afraid—afraid of the economy and its effects on their families, afraid of being judged by another, afraid of not having enough money to eat, or afraid of not being able to live our values in the world—they get defensive.

And defensive people project their fears onto well-meaning folks all the time.

Fear also makes people seek comfort in unhealthy things.

Have you noticed that there's pretty much no such thing as healthy "comfort food?" I have. And what is "comfort food" supposed to do? Comfort us in times of anxiety, give us certainty in times of fear.

And I can't be alone in responding to the stress of fear by eating bad things.

Again, I don't say this to invite your diet advice. I've got plenty, and the rational part of me knows exactly what to do. Rather, I say this to let you know that you're not the only one ordering more pizza these days and less broccoli.

It's not just food. Addictions of all sorts often begin as a way to cope with feelings that we don't want to have. Economic recessions are linked to rising rates of alcoholism. People turn to unhealthy behaviors mistakenly grasping for control over a life made uncertain by forces outside of themselves.

It is no wonder that many twelve-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous have adopted Reinhold Neibuhr's famous words, now called the "serenity prayer" as a basis for dealing with addiction.

Neibuhr wrote:

"God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other." (Neibuhr)

This prayer asks for grace, courage and wisdom in the face of uncertainty. It is a prayer written in the mid-1930s, in another time of deep economic insecurity and fear in this nation.

So how do we deal with fear?

Part of dealing with fear is dealing with the uncertainty that surrounds us. Rather than seeking to exercise control over things we cannot, though, we need to find ways to live our lives in the face of uncertainty.

American Buddhist nun Pema Chodron, in her essay "Comfortable with Uncertainty," writes: "We can try to control the uncontrollable by looking for security and predictability, always hoping to be comfortable and safe. But the truth is that we can never avoid uncertainty. This not-knowing is part of the adventure. It's also what makes us afraid." (Chodron, 5)

Chodron reminds us that fear is a natural part of living, and counsels us to train ourselves through spiritual practice to be comfortable with it. To her Buddhist followers, she, of course, recommends Buddhist practices.

To a group of Unitarian Universalists, I recommend Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice.

What is that, you might ask?

First, we deal with fear by nurturing our own spirits. Finding the practices that bring us in contact with things outside of ourselves.

For some, these will be the Buddhist practices of meditation and study that Chodron teaches. For others, it means prayer, or walks in nature, or setting aside a moment of the day for a special conversation. It might mean yoga, or lighting a candle, or reading a book.

Because we are a faith with no easy answers, it is not up to me to tell you the personal spiritual practices that are right for you. Find something makes you feel good—what makes you feel centered, calm, secure, connected to the world around you. And do it. Every day.

Me? I'm a lousy meditator. But I do pray, in my own way, and I cook, sharing love through physical nourishment as a spiritual practice. My morning time with a steaming cup of coffee and the newspaper is a nurturing part of my day that I sorely miss when I have to skip it.

Next, we can deal with fear by spreading goodness in our world. Like a stone thrown into a pond, our efforts to help others, our work for justice and equity, and our healing the broken world around us spread ripples out from us that extend farther than we know.

Doing good for others helps us maintain a connection to the world. Whether it's donating cocoa to the food pantry, cooking for the homeless, fighting racism in community coalitions or protesting on the steps of City Hall for love and equality, the things we do for others help us understand that we are not alone in this world, and that we are not the ultimate end of existence. This is spiritual work.

Maintaining those connections to others is a vital part of the Unitarian Universalist practices I recommend to help us deal with fear.

In times of great uncertainty, we can create certainty by being together in community. In times of deep fear, we can create courage by standing together. In times of despair, we can create hope through our empathy with others around us.

I also believe firmly that our Unitarian Universalist faith is, when practiced best, a relational faith. Ultimate meaning is found not one-on-one with God, but in relationship and in community.

It is in times of uncertainty and fear that coming together as a religious community—to worship, to learn, to have fun, to do the work of justice, to do the work of caring for one another.

In times like these, it becomes all the more important that we are there for one another. That we reach out to others going through a hard time. That we open our hearts and minds to what others here are dealing with. That we create a place where people can come and be exactly who they are—hurts and all, wounds and all, insecurities and fears alongside wishes and dreams.

This, I believe, is the ultimate Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice: to be a community of healing, wholeness and hope. A community whose doors are open, whose hands are helping, and whose love casts out all fear.

Let us engage in that practice together. Blessed be.

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