

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan
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Courage

FIVE BASIC EMOTIONS

There are five basic human emotions: joy, sadness, fear, anger, and shame. The fifth one, shame, is the only learned emotion. The other four are innate in humans: joy and sadness, anger and fear. My topic this morning is Courage, and I define Courage as a possible response to the basic human emotion of fear.

BIRD / NEST / FLYING

Let's consider the story that Kendra shared with all of us this morning: [If I Never Forever Endeavor by Holly Meade](#).¹ The main character in the story, the baby bird, is facing her fear. And there are two possible responses to that fear. One is to stay in the safety of the nest. I say that this is always one of the ways we can respond to fear: run away and/or hide. It is very tempting to stay in the nest. The other choice involves summoning Courage. The bird must summon Courage to fly out of the nest. And the fear is real – there is a real danger to the bird. It could fall and get hurt. Risking the unknown is the choice that involves courage.

HUMAN: BEAR IN THE WOODS

For humans, there is a good reason that we evolved to feel fear. Let's consider a situation that might have occurred to a human in earlier centuries or millennia of our evolution: Let's say that you are in the woods and you're confronted by a bear. You feel the basic human emotion of fear. And that's good! The feeling of fear tells you that there is a real danger here. The bear could hurt you. Just like the bird knows the real danger of falling if they try to fly. This is a familiar and essential human experience to feel fear and to have two basic options: you can run and/or hide from the bear. Like the bird in the nest, this option involves the familiar. Run back to safety. Or you can confront the bear. This option involves stepping into the unknown. I didn't say this was the right option--but certainly it's the option that requires you to summon your Courage.

[If you are actually hiking and encounter a bear, you need to use best safety practices which differ for black bears and grizzly bears.]

Of course, in my life I am not very likely to encounter a bear in the woods. When I feel fear, it is usually much more abstract. I want to explore two things that are causing me a lot of fear these days, and to explore what a Courageous response might be.

POLITICS

My first example is politics. I don't know about you, but I have followed both the Democratic and the Republican national conventions in the past two weeks. Now, you may know, or you may easily be able to guess which party and which candidate I prefer in the upcoming

presidential election, but what I'm about to say I think could be said by someone on either side of this political divide:

I have a great deal of fear when I think about the other party and the other party's candidate winning election. I am really scared thinking about the kind of America that would create. (Don't you agree that people on both sides could be saying this...and if so, that shows you that fear is hugely present in this nation today.)

In one way, this fear is similar to the examples I gave before. I can run away and hide from the thing I fear. I can retreat to the familiar, like a bird staying in a nest, and pretend it's going to be OK. Or I can summon my Courage: proclaim my beliefs; work for the candidate I believe in. This is risky and leads to the unknown. Courage always involves stepping into the unknown, and responding to fear by hiding always involves choosing the known.

But in another way, this fear is different from the fear of the bird leaving the nest or the person confronting a bear in the woods. Political fear is abstract. It is imagining a possible future. Yes, there are concrete elements to the political fear—health care, wages, the environment—but it is fundamentally abstract and thus harder to get ahold of. It is harder to face my fear because it is inside as much as outside.

I said before that fear was a useful human emotion, because it allows us to identify danger. Fear that is vague and abstract, however, is not useful. Fearing the bear in front of you compels you to choose action. Fearing a bear that might or might not be there in the bushes is not a useful emotion. And fearing a political enemy is more like a fearing an unseen bear.

DUNE: THE BENE GESSERIT LITANY AGAINST FEAR

In the novel Dune by Frank Herbert, one of the greatest science fiction novels, there is a "litany against fear." The protagonist of the story learns this litany as part of his training, and he repeats it to himself when he feels afraid:

I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will allow it to pass over me and through me. And when it has passed, I will turn the Inner Eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone, there will be nothing. Only I will remain.²

Fear can be self-defeating, especially vague fear. Overcoming fear and staying calm is empowering, but requires self-awareness and self-control.

RACIAL INJUSTICE

My last example today is racial injustice, and the fear of speaking out about it. I said there were two things causing me a lot of fear these days: one is politics and one is racial injustice.

I chose to share those words of my colleague, the Rev. Carol Cissel, this morning because racial injustice is once again in our national consciousness. Once again we saw police violence against a Black man this week with the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

And I want to explore the idea of fear and Courage by using myself and by using my colleague Rev. Carol. In her essay, Rev. Carol describes the Courage of being Black in this society and the Courage it takes to raise Black or bi-racial children in this society. She says that:

My parents knew that much of America—chiefly White America—was waiting to tell us we were useless, vile, paltry, stupid, dirty, unwanted, disposable, or pathetic. They respected authority, but also told all of us that the world lacked Justice, Equity and Compassion for Black Folx so we better be careful. My mother and father armed us with this truth: The world is awful, magnificent, and belongs to you as much as it belongs to anyone else.³

Rev. Carol's words say to me that it is natural as a Black person in America to fear the white supremacist society that surrounds you. But her story reveals the Courage of running for class president, of engaging with that white supremacist society again and again with head held high.

By contrast, my wrestling with fear when I see another case of racial injustice—when I see the shooting of Jacob Blake and the protests in Kenosha Wisconsin—I'm ashamed to say that my fear is the fear of speaking up. I'm afraid of the unrest. I'm afraid of the violence against Black men. I'm afraid that the protests are going to turn violent and that there will be looting. And then I'm afraid to speak up. What if what I say is too radical? What if what I say is too controversial? What if other people twist my words and think badly of me for what I'm saying?

Like the examples of fear I gave before, I can respond by running away and hiding. My white privilege and other privileged identities certainly allow me to do that. I can retreat and be silent. And of course you can see that this isn't an option for Rev. Carol Cissel—being Black in America means there is no running or hiding from racism.

Or, I can summon my Courage in this situation. I can see that the fear is mostly imagined—indeed, the fear I had of speaking up and being somehow bad is much less than the fear that I will not speak up, be complicit with racial injustice and police violence through my silence, and thereby create a more violent and less safe world for everyone.

CONCLUSION

There are five basic human emotions: shame is the only learned emotion; the four we are born with are joy, sadness, anger, and fear. Like the bird leaving the nest, every human knows that we can respond to fear by moving toward safety—the known—or by summoning Courage to step into the unknown. I don't know what will happen as I become a bolder advocate for racial justice. May I have the Courage to face my fear and to find out.

As I have shared my story of fear and Courage, and the example Rev. Carol's Courage and her family's Courage, I invite you to consider:

Who are the examples of courage in your life? In stories that you know? When in your life have you been courageous, and how are you called to be courageous now? I would love to hear your thoughts about this; I would love to have you share that with each other in this sacred community.

May all of us summon our Courage to be the best versions of ourselves that we can be; and may this community strengthen us in doing so.

May it be so.

¹ Holly Meade, "If I Never Forever Endeavor," Candlewick, 2011.

² Frank Herbert, Dune, originally published by Chilton in 1965.

³ Rev. Carol Thomas Cissel, "An Awful, Magnificent Truth," published June 3, 2020 as part of the Braver, Wiser series of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

<https://www.uua.org/braverwiser/awful-magnificent-truth>