

Sunday Service [last revised, 25 October 2004]  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Paris, France  
Sunday, 24 October 2004 12:00

**Sermon:** *Without a Lantern*

**OR** *Turning Toward the Morning: When Hope Knocks Out Fear* by Rev. Gretchen Thomas [gretchen.thomas@tele2.se](mailto:gretchen.thomas@tele2.se)

In *Little House on the Prairie*, every night after dinner seven-year-old Laura has the job of bedding down the animals in the barn. Laura is one of the most conscientious children ever to appear on television, and she is not going to let her family down. But she has a huge difficulty. On many nights the path from the house to the barn lies in complete darkness. And Laura is deeply afraid of the dark.

Are you afraid of the dark? Or is there another fear that you must confront in this daily kind of way?

My good friend Janis has been struggling with a new, potentially soul-withering fear. A month ago, suddenly and for no reason anyone can discover, an artery in her brain began to bleed. It caused severe brain trauma, and brought her very close to dying. Miraculously, and mysteriously, she survived without any disabilities and has made a strong and quick recovery. She says with astonishment and gratitude that she actually feels like her old self. Except Janis now suffers from fear.

She wrote me: “Although I have emerged free of all the obvious calamitous possibilities, there is one I have not escaped. For the first time in my entire 57 years I am living in truly debilitating fear. I have, for the moment anyway, lost my self-confidence and sense of freedom. To live in this kind of fear, is not really to live at all. My biggest fear,” she said, “is fear of *what if this should happen again?* I am determined to overcome all of this. So now I must conquer the fears with work, time, and above all, God's own grace.”

If Janis were your friend, what could you say to her? If you were deeply afraid your brain might be about to bleed, what would you say to yourself?

In these are times of increasing terrorist activity we have all been asking ourselves this same question: how is it possible to reconnect with hope in the midst of a time filled with fear? Terrorism is, of course, our most graphic example of deliberately setting fear loose in the world and making it grow. As the United States moves toward its elections, the U.S. seems to have become a society caught up in fear. A primary platform put forward by both sides is, “Elect the candidate who will keep you safe.” How should voters respond to election campaigns that are, to quote a *New York Times* editorial, “based on scare tactics and other institutionally sanctioned non-honesty”? American friends tell me they resent that they are being manipulated, but they find it very hard to keep from being made afraid by it. Personally, I find the new security measures in airports – including Charles de Gaulle, where I just walked into a baggage bomb-scare delay – make me feel more fearful, instead of more secure. I’m wondering what those different colored Threat Alerts accomplish except to instill pointless fear? And I remember how

angry my father got in the early 1950s when I told him that we'd had an atomic bomb attack drill at school where we practiced getting under our desks after a siren sounded.

What can people do when they begin to feel their own government leaders are using sophisticated methods to purposely make them afraid?

Since 9/11 the stores have been full of books that explain hope and fear. I have read several of them, including three by UU authors. All these authors advocate "moving through and beyond your fears. Their perspective is that hope is eternal, ever present, even though fear often blocks our contact with hope, in the same way we lose contact with sunlight during the night even though the sun is always shining.

Fear is not an evil force. But it is arresting, and it can be paralyzing. Fearfulness is a closed, isolated state in which we turn inward -- like Sara in the children's story, whose fears made her stop playing and stop wanting to be with her friends. Fear creates a false vision of comfort and security that makes it quite tempting to cling to our fears.

What are your children and your grandchildren afraid of? I remember when I was a teenager, being terrified of telling my parents about things I'd done that I knew would make them angry or disappointed in me. So, like my sister and my brother, I lied to them, told them what I thought they *wanted* to hear. It's not good to let yourself become someone who regularly lies about your mistakes or the things you are afraid others might not approve of. It took me years and years to change that about myself.

What's your list of the things *you* are afraid of? What are you doing about them? Of course I've asked myself that question. At first I couldn't think of a fear I had that really mattered. I thought I was writing this sermon because I want us all to stand up against the way we are being constantly manipulated into being afraid. Or so I told myself. Until I remembered that I haven't driven our car, or any car, for several years now. And I'm becoming a more and more nervous passenger -- as Dorothy Erlandson, who has patiently and skillfully driven me to several Retreats, can testify. The thing is, I'd forgotten all about that! Maybe we all repress or discount our really biggest fears. When you see me again I'm determined to be driving, so I'd better go find myself a rock. But our fears won't go away just because we want them to, even when we're very determined to change. Like Sara, we have to work at it. We have to *carry* our fears, before we can set them down.

These post-9/11 authors say sometimes our fearful times are a period of winter that is *necessary* to enable rebirth. They say we must *immerse* ourselves in our hard times in order to then move through and beyond them. The more poetic of the authors urge us to "listen to our heart's song." These authors say we must trust, as Sara trusted Mr. Watson, that confidence, courage, and hope will be able to carve a path, a path that can guide us and enable us to move through and beyond our fears.

They warn that the path is not easy. We cannot take hope for granted, and the lessons of our hard times cannot be avoided. Everyone who has struggled with an addiction or with an obsessive compulsive disorder will tell you that once they stop their escapist activity, they are

faced with many avoided fears which they must now overcome. We all have to earn our courage step by step, putting one foot in front of the other through our hard times. And we must learn from those peoples of the earth who have for centuries been living vitally and hopefully in the midst of fear-filled times. Many of them would tell us that enduring hunger, cold, or poverty is not as difficult as overcoming fear. We need to become clear about who is creating today's world-wide climate of fear, who benefits most from it, and how it is affecting us day to day. These writers warn that above all we must not deny our fears. Trying to hide from our fears will *not* let us escape any of the harm they do.

There are a lot of things we think are something else, that are in fact fear, or rooted in fear. Worry, anxiety and dread; guilt and shame; depression, low self-esteem and insecurity; as well as some angers, all phobias, bullying, and even toddlers' biting – we need to understand the role of fear in all of these. As well, when something new or unexpected enters our life – something that needs to be understood and integrated – we are always tempted to fear it.

Gordon Bok's message for living in the face of fear is "the world is always turning toward the morning." Others have said the same thing: "This too shall pass," or "You can always start again and do it differently this time." Bok's song (that we heard earlier) describes the struggle to find this place of acceptance and surrender in the midst of darkness and depression, in the midst of our fear. Bok is an American folksinger from Camden Maine who wrote *Turning Toward the Morning* (with its memorable line, "If I had a thing to give you, I would tell you one more time, that the world is always turning toward the morning") for a close friend who had had a very difficult year and "was looking in November for the courage to keep plowing into it." "Those are the times," Bok explains, "when you 'lift your eyes unto the hills.' But the hills of Northern New England," he said, "can be about as much comfort as a cold crowbar. You have to look ahead a bit, and realize that the hills and trees and flowers will still be there come spring, always more permanent than your troubles. Finding the courage to start over again takes time, and if your courage occasionally fails," Bok says, "that's okay too--nobody expects you to be as strong as the land. You can just tell them that you're weeping until the morning comes."

*Trust in the healing nature of time* is Bok's recipe for how to deal with fear. Wendell Berry, another poet, says (as does every Swede you'll ever meet) that we should "turn to nature," we *should* "lift our eyes unto the hills." But then, Wendell Berry lives in Kentucky, so his hills are far south of Northern New England's. Berry writes, "When despair for the world grows in me, and I wake in the night at the least sound, in fear of what my life, and my children's lives may be, I go lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time, I rest in the grace of the world, and am free." To be free of fear, Berry says, we must *come into the peace of wild things, and rest in the grace of the world.*

What Gordon Bok and Wendell Berry understand is that we need both time and space, need silence and time alone, in order to take our own counsel, to act on our own instincts and understandings. Clarity and calm evaporate fear, and allow movement. With time and space, we will eventually trust ourselves to learn the lessons offered by our lives, to know that terrible things happen, and it is still possible to move forward with love and hope. Time and space let us

“put ourselves in wisdom’s way.” Time and space are just what my friend Janis needed. It helps to trust that hope will reassert itself with the passing of time, that hope itself will guide us out of our fears.

But there is more we can do. The writers of the post-9/11 books all say that *to find hope we must make meaning out of our fear*. We can search to understand what makes us fearful and why it has power over us – see a counselor, find and use a spiritual practice, read appropriate books. And (*my favorite part*) we can learn from others’ stories of how fear has worked, and worked out, in their lives. We can strengthen our faith by simply talking with others about their experiences, whether that means sharing a meal with an insightful, empathetic friend, or joining an on-going support group. Our lives will continue to bring us experiences, but we will not learn and grow from them if our fears prevent our arms from being open, if our fears prevent us from being with friends who can act as sounding boards, if having fears means we have no song.

Victoria Safford, the author of our earlier Reading, says it is the stories of others’ lives that inspire her to live more fully, to live with less fear and more faith. Here is how she tells one of the stories that has changed her life in this way:

“She had come [into the church office] asking for directions to a shelter, something she’d never dared do before. She was carrying her jacket, nothing else. And her fear – fear of what she was leaving and fear of where she might be going. Fear, like a burden on her back, but also like a driving engine. She told me, “You know, when I am in my home I am so anxious I can’t even pray my morning prayers. (She comes from a country and a tradition where such prayers and praise matter deeply.) So she left her home, bringing only a jacket, along with her fear and the courage she was just beginning to find within herself. But also,” Safford says, “it seems to me, she had her dignity, her clarity, and her morning prayers, all still beautifully intact; like precious china, but more durable; like jewels, but more ordinary, more useful; like tools for basic survival, but more lovely, more private, more delicate. These things she had brought were a lot for one woman to carry by herself, but I’m thinking they may also be just enough.” Safford closes her account by saying: “I don’t expect to see her again, except in memory, except in prayer, except in my own solitary searching for sources of conviction.”

Stay close to others who are dealing with their fears. It will help you deal with yours. Listen to the stories from others’ lives. There you will find sources for *your* convictions.

At yesterday’s workshop Dorothy Erlandson told a wonderful story about registering a ninety-year-old woman who has not voted since she moved to France in 1949. That sent us all home with hope in our hearts. Last weekend I went all the way to Boston for a wedding. I went because I have marched in many protests and voted so many times for causes and candidates that did not win the day. So I leapt at the privilege of going to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to conduct a long-overdue wedding for a same sex couple who have, in truth, been married already for many, many years. It was a chance to celebrate one of the causes for justice and love that *has* won the day in my own time. Katy, the couple’s oldest daughter, said during the ceremony: “Now we never have to be afraid again that we are not a real family. Now we are

whole.” And I wonder, *What if* I had decided, out of fear, that Boston was too far away, or that I couldn’t stop to write a wedding service when I hadn’t yet finished this sermon. *What if* Dorothy had decided not to register voters?

When we’re looking for wholeness and courage, *What if?* is the wrong question. *Why me?* is more helpful. Asking yourself, *What if* they tell me my family is not a real family? or, *What if* there is another terrorist attack? or, *What if* there’s a bear out here in the dark beside the barn? is likely to send you into hiding. But asking, *Why am I still here* when others are not? or, *Why am I the one* doing this job? or, *Why am I* being denied my right to be part of a legal family? might very well lead you out into the world, a world that needs your care and energy. That’s what the couples found who brought suits in Canadian and US courts to change the marriage laws to include same-sex couple. (Did you know that the majority of them were UU couples?) That’s what my friend Janis has found. Her fear of dying, or worse, from another bleed in her brain has faded away in the face of all she feels she has to live for. She’s stopped using the sign she made to wear around her neck that read, “If you find me unconscious, please....” Like Sara, in the children’s story, she has acknowledged, lived with, and then set down her fear.

The Buddhists advocate practicing “right thinking,” a fine antidote to being manipulated by the media or by election hype. Each time you notice yourself being afraid, you take the time to change gears, and replace your fearful thought with a positive, hopeful one. When you observe yourself feeling guilt or shame, when you catch yourself staying too much at home because you are more comfortable there, when you are excessively protective of your children, when you feel repeatedly vulnerable or inadequate – stop, and deliberately replace that with a confident, courageous perspective. Nietzsche, who is a strong advocate for “right thinking,” urges us to make every important decision in a state of *joy*, when we are filled with *hope*. If Nietzsche were alive today he would probably say, “What the world needs now, are leaders who will tell us, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

So...Step #1 is to acknowledge and understand your fears. But the problem is that *knowing* what you are doing is really very little help. What matters is what you *do* about it. That is Step #2. Take action, become an advocate, put a rock in your backpack, put your energy into change, practice right thinking, walk out into the dark night. In ancient China there was a philosopher who was asked, “Where is the road called hope?” He replied, “It does not exist, except that *as* people walk upon it, it comes into being.” Look for opportunities to *act* that will bring you hope.

To live in our dark times, our hard times, *without* fear-- that is what we are in need of now. Darkness without fear-- a lesson many throughout the world need to learn. The point is not to try fearfully to insure a country’s safety from attack. Rather, the point is to get on with learning the lessons any attacks bring, in order to rise with hope and joy to new understandings of yourselves and of your new place in the world. Living *hopefully* greatly increases the odds on living a vital, inter-connected life based in reality, filled with renewal and joy. Just as important, living *hopefully decreases* the chance that we will live arrogantly or selfishly or in denial. And we know that if our spirit shrivels, the possibility of hope dries up with it.

*If we are to be a hopeful people, we must create experiences that feed our souls. That is the Third Step. We can all move toward lives that are more faithful, more filled with faith and*

meaning. We have all had time-outs, when we parked our spiritual nature idly in a corner to stand and wait until there was a crisis. The spiritual dimension of life is always waiting our call, our attention, our presence. Like the sign outside the new casino in my city says: “You must be present to win.” We can be present. We can be mindful.

Hope and fear. They march hand in hand through all our lives. For the last three years, wherever we are living in the world, hope and fear have been vying for our hearts and minds, and for the hearts and minds of our children. Personally, I would like this “war on terror” to be refocused as a “war on fear.” We want to set out into the world with peace in our hearts, and hope in our souls. Peace and hope will take us where we need to go and bring us safely home.

*To overcome fear we must make meaning out of our fears and take actions that strengthen our faith. To find hope we must create experiences that feed our souls. We must walk down the darkness toward the morning.* That’s what I needed to write to my friend Janis. That’s what we must each say to ourselves in our fearful times. That’s what we can help each other remember. That can be your beacon while you create together this community of hope and faith within a world that is turning toward the morning.

Remember Laura Ingalls Wilder standing halfway between the house and the barn, frozen with fear in the immense darkness of the prairie night? Laura always carried a lantern to light her way and chase away her fear. But the lantern lets her see only a few feet around her. Eventually she realizes that *because* of the lantern light she is more afraid of the unseen and unknown. So Laura puts out the lantern, she waits for her eyes to adjust to the dark, and she is able to see her way despite the darkness.

Maybe that’s what fear is—a limiting light, a false protection. If you learn to move through your life without fear, you can adjust more fully to your real surroundings, and then you can truly see your way. When you stand in the darkness without a lantern, and look upwards, like Laura, you will see the stars.

We *will* set down our fears among the flowers.