

While Jogging Through Life I Found Myself Running from Fear
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Paris
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For four decades I jogged nearly every day. That included summers at our cabin. I would climb into a little outboard, drive the boat from the island to the mainland, then shuffle up the twisty aboriginal trail that runs between Georgian Bay and the Shawanaga First Nations Band reserve. It's called Shawanaga Road.

On June 28 I wrote in my diary:

To think it's only been five months since Philip and I skied down that road to the bay last January. The temperature was -24. The road looked so different and so beautiful covered with snow – crystalline cold, impossibly quiet and blindingly bright. I love that road. ...Mike is camping at the landing for the long weekend. Says he's already seen a small bear with its cubs in the bush. So what? It makes running risky, but not very...

July 1

Saw a rattlesnake swimming toward Pig Island... On the road just beyond where it swings sharply right I came upon a black bear. It was on the left hand side with its face in the daisies. I saw it first, paused, considered quietly sneaking away, but decided to blow my whistle and raise my arm rather than flee. The bear bolted to the right, stopped, stood up, looked at me. I kept on blowing. I also began backing up. Finally, after it lumbered off to the left I turned around and sprinted back to Shawanaga Landing. That was it for running today – real short. Back to the old dilemma: To jog or not to jog that is the question. Whether it is noble or stupid to go traipsing through the woods?

Yann Martel writes in the novel *Life of Pi*.

"I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary, how well I know. It has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unerring ease. It begins in your mind, always. One moment you are feeling calm, self-possessed, happy. Then fear, disguised in the garb of mild-mannered doubt, slips into your mind like a spy. Doubt meets disbelief and disbelief tries to push it out. But disbelief is a poorly armed foot soldier. Doubt does away with it with little trouble. You become anxious. Reason comes to do battle for you. You are reassured. Reason is fully equipped with the latest weapon technology. But to your amazement, despite superior tactics and a number of undeniable victories, reason is laid low. You feel yourself weakening, wavering. Your anxiety becomes dread."

July 5

Went running. No bear except in my head. Carrying a rock in each hand, Memento Mori Memento Mori "remember death" going through my mind I tried to focus on the moment instead of upon my fear but it was difficult, almost impossible...

July 8

Every morning I confront death anew. What am I afraid of? Riding my bicycle in Toronto traffic is certainly more dangerous, so is kayaking without a life vest, and without a doubt Highway 69, where the occasional bumper stickers reads 'I survived 69' is worse. What am I really afraid of? My life and ego-identity will one day come to an end and this incessant chattering in my head will cease but all that I have been and have given cannot die. Yet, if I don't fear death why the dread?

July 11

Sam says he speaks to bears. He told me he says, 'Hello grandfather. How are you?' He speaks in Ojibwa. He says animals understand it. Nonsense, or is it? Sam still keeps his distance. "Out of respect," he says, but I can think of other reasons... All I want is for the bear to know I'm present. I don't have to blow a whistle to do that. Don't have to act intimidating which is what I have been doing. Or maybe that is what I've been trying to communicate 'I'm big too so give me berth.' I could always simply clear out and say today the bear needs the road to eat daisies and dig up roots. I could jog somewhere else or not at all. Today it's the bear's turn, perhaps tomorrow the road will be mine again.

July 12

I went jogging even though it was drizzling; figured no one – man or beast - would be out there, and it was true not even an insect. I went the length of the road and turned back. As usual it was a struggle not to let my mind stray and, as usual, it kept drifting away. This is not only frustrating it's dangerous. My attention needs to be on my surroundings - on the woods and the road and the sounds. My attention needed to be on the road. All of a sudden it was there – the bear. In the same place as before but on the other side of the road on a rocky outcropping. When I saw it was on all fours with his back toward me. I didn't want to surprise it so I spoke. "Peace brother bear." It stopped. I kept jogging but waved and said "Peace Mkwa" that's Ojibwa for bear. I hesitated. He stood up and looked at me. He had round ears, like my old mouseketeers hat, and a long nose. I said to myself, "Now, Mark, you are not really going to have a conversation with this bear. You're going to keep your behind moving down this road" and I did. I looked back. Nothing. I looked again. Nothing. Every time I looked nothing was there - not even a fly. This is clearly his turf, his territory and habitat. What we – the bear and I need to do - is to maintain a respectful distance. Perhaps with familiarity seeing my coming it will simply think, 'Oh, it's just that big brown jogger.'

July 13

Communing with bears is romantic poppycock. Norm once shot a bear that approached him while he was out hunting. Of course, someone else told me of an acquaintance of hers who has come across hundreds of bears in the woods and nothing has ever happened. But what about me? Am I going to keep jogging or not?

Again in *Life of Pi* Martel writes: "Fear next turns to your body, which is already aware that something terribly wrong is going on. Already your lungs have flown away like a bird and your guts have slithered away like a snake. Now your tongue drops dead like an opossum, while your jaw begins to gallop on the spot. Your ears go deaf. Your muscles begin to shiver as if they had malaria and yours knees to shake as though they were dancing. Your heart strains too hard, while your sphincter relaxes too much. And so with the rest of your body. Every part of you, in the manner most suited to it, falls apart. Only your eyes work well. They always pay proper attention."

July 14

Sweat began beading upon my forehead and I'd just started. This wasn't exertion; it was fear. It was cold out, not hot. I tried to scan both sides of the road but the sweat stung my eyes and the weeds on the shoulder hadn't been mowed and there were so many shadows in the woods. Today, I'm ready to speak because yesterday Sam wrote it down for me "Ahneen Mishomis" that's Hello Grandfather in Ojibwa, and "Ahneen Nokmis" is Hello Grandmother. I hoped I don't get close enough to tell what sex it is, and that she or he wouldn't be offended if I got the gender wrong.

July 18

No bear, but I was more alert as my eyes scanned from side to side searching, but the shadows are impossible to penetrate. I came upon a doe and fawn on the road. I suppose that's a good sign...

July 19

Eight Kevlar canoes on the beach this morning – red, white, yellow and green. There is always an edge in running now. But today all I saw was the great, gray sweep of the heron's wings departing as I approached the marsh. The beavers have been at work rebuilding their dam... There are tracks upon the road – moose perhaps. "Mind, try to be quieter" I said to myself as my attention drifted yet again. "My God, those are big tracks. A bear?" My momentum froze mid-step. "Oh, they're just my own." I'm approaching the landing. The wind has stiffened. I can hear the boats going thump, thump, thump against the dock. I jog because it is an adventure – a little adventure, a cautious one, but nonetheless there is always something unexpected on the road ... that and fear.

Yet again from *Life of Pi*: "Quickly you make rash decisions. You dismiss your last allies: hope and trust. There, you've defeated yourself. Fear, which is but an impression, has triumphed over you."

In truth, rationality had already failed me for as the summer passed no matter what I told myself I could not shake the sense of foreboding or sensation of fear. The anticipatory tightness, deer-like vigilance, pounding heart that gripped me day after day as I gripped the rock tight in hand, led me to dismiss my last allies trust and hope. I don't think it was death that scared me. I just couldn't tolerate the constant fear of being attacked. It was too much for me so I stopped jogging.

I think you know what I'm talking about: What was it like walking around Paris on January 7 after the Charlie Hedo attack? What about following the November 13 attack? What was it like after the March 23 bombing in Brussels? Have you had feelings that simply overpower you and your will? Has your behavior changed? Are you more watchful? Are there more procedures? Are you more suspicious? Are you asking why are we harboring these people?

When your life, your health and safety, your children are threatened then what?

January 2004, two weeks before I was to fly to Paris, I landed in the cardiac ward at Toronto General – a discomfort in my chest, a numbness in my left arm and a blood test that indicated I had damaged my heart put me there. I felt fine but doubt and fear overwhelmed disbelief leaving anxieties free to grow. What if I have had a heart attack? What will it mean for me? My family? The congregation? Then as I waited three days for the ultimate diagnostic test – an angiogram – more terrible thoughts intruded. Sleep fled. Beneath the blankets I trembled. It took a sleeping pill to hold fear at bay. Uncertainty ruled my emotional life.

What did they find out? My heart was normal. I felt fine. The physicians assume the blood test was simply a false positive. So the fear subsided for the moment, but all it will take for fear to arise again is an "impression" of danger. Or even less. Something about travelling triggers something in me – tightness in my abdomen, loss of appetite, tremors, the urge to hide; and thinking of the attacks upon Paris and Brussels made it a little more intense.

All it takes is a hint, an "impression." That one summer in Georgian Bay for three and a half weeks I did not set foot upon Shawanaga Road.

August 13

Jogging for the first time in a long time. No bear and no surprises except the road looked like a highway. Big trucks have been going up and down it. I can tell from the tread marks of the tires in the sand and I've heard the rumbling and there was a dumpster at the Landing and Penfold just drove past me and Pavis has been going back and forth several times a day...How foolish I've been.

August 18

The bear has probably moved on because the daisies are gone and so is the clover; it's probably gone deeper into the woods where the people are fewer and the berry picking better. Now I wonder how many times I've been near a bear and not known it. Does the bear see me and freeze? ... Dew gives the grass a silvery sheen... a darting blue-gray and white blur plunges into the bay leaving rippling circles. It flies in bursts. Wonder what it is? ...Mist on the water – a very still day.

August 19

I know what I saw yesterday. There were two kingfishers again this morning darting, then hovering, then diving and splashing. The second one cruised just above the bay and splash. ...Why would the bear still be out there? It wasn't just hanging around, it was foraging and if the food is gone it would move on. Of course, it's gone, I hope...

August 20

The gravelly parts of the road make it sound as if I'm running on sandpaper. The marsh has a dank, musky smell. As I reach the woods the air is cool. Later I came upon a muggy and misty stretch. All these microclimates I pass through on a simple jog up and down my road and today. I barely thought about the bear at all.

The emotions that arise come as unbidden as the breeze and burn away like the mist. Perhaps we cannot conquer or control our fears but at least we can name them. In naming we begin to recognize them, recognize them and we can begin to befriend them; if we can befriend them we can embrace them as companions on our life journeys.

A final elaboration on this from *Life of Pi*: "The matter is difficult to put into words. For fear, real fear, such as shakes you to your foundation, such as you feel when you are brought face to face with your mortal end, nestles in your memory like gangrene: it seeks to rot everything, even the words with which to speak of it. So you must fight hard to express it. You must fight to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you."

Mark Morrison-Reed