

Shining in the Stillness: Facing Fear and Anxiety

Jan K. Nielsen

The Unitarian Universalist Church, Little Rock, Arkansas

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“Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers, but to be fearless in facing them. Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain, but for the heart to conquer it.” - Rabindranath Tagore

Call to Worship: *Let not the hours pass by in the dark. Kindle the lamp of love with thy life.* -Rabindranath Tagore

Sermon

We’re all afraid of something. We carry all kinds of fears – some unique, some universal. Some of us fear spiders, needles or heights; nearly all of us fear, on some level, that we’ll wind up alone, without enough to get by and with no one around to help us out. Our anxiety about ending up alone and unable to take care of ourselves -- either because of failing health or failing bank accounts, or both – is a deeply human fear. It’s a fear of being cast aside, a fear of being outside the flow of life, a fear of being cut off from the lifeline of love. Whether or not we choose to name our fears, we’re all afraid of something. To be human is to know fear.

It’s not fashionable in our world to admit to fears of any kind. Instead, we live with the illusion of invincibility. We can handle anything, the mantra goes, with the right “equipment,” the right things. Cell phones and our other electronic devices are a case in point. For the record, I have nothing against cell phones. Mine is with me most of the time; I often have it in my pocket as I preach. I’m wondering: did anyone forget to bring your phone when you left home this morning? Anyone walk out the door without your phone? We’re pretty good at remembering to take our phones, but sometimes we forget. When you forget your phone, do you stop, turn around, and go back to get it? I’ll admit I’ve turned my car around and gone back, just to get my phone.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, in his book called *Fear: Essential Wisdom for Getting through the Storm*, spoke directly to me: “You think you can’t live without your cell phone. You are fearful,” he writes, “when you forget and leave your phone at home. You worry when your battery starts to run low.” (He’s right!) Our phones can keep us on the go, 24/7 – and it’s not just our phones. Sometimes life brings the preacher what she most needs even if it is not what she ever would have ordered. One day last week, I was running down a long to do list at a pretty good clip when, you might say, I got involuntarily unplugged.

The word “unplugged” in our language has taken on a new meaning over the past decade or so. Some of my colleagues “unplug” for a time each week, meaning they are offline – away from phones and texts, emails and social media, as a way of honoring a time of Sabbath, a time of rest in their week. Maybe we should all try to unplug sometime, if only for a day or an afternoon or an evening – but that’s a sermon for another day – sort of.

I won’t go into all of the details of my technological travail, but I will say for the record that my phone worked just fine throughout, and that’s a good thing, because not much else did. I ran into troubles logging into the online account at my son’s college – so I could pay his tuition bill. It took seven phone calls to various departments before they realized that the login problem was on their end, not ours, and I was able, finally, to get the school to take our money. I also found myself locked out of my laptop and spent time, and several calls with tech support, trying to fix a problem that’s still not fixed. And then my church email password just quit working – so if I owe you an email, you now know why.

Now I really do try to practice what I preach, but I'll tell you that this stuff really got to me, especially the tuition thing. I was trying to take care of my son just about the only way I can right now with him away in his first year of college, by paying a bill to keep him in school, and I felt powerless. After my voice got a little too loud on one call with the school and cracked with tears on another, I knew that something more than technology troubles had hold of me. I was feeling the stress and frustration of it all along with the pressure (self-imposed) to hurry up and get things done, and I was angry. When I slowed a bit (because I was mostly unplugged), I could see that beneath my anger, I was feeling sadness that he is so far away and also fear, the fear that if someday because of time or circumstances I can no longer get things done, I won't matter much to anyone anymore. Maybe you know the feeling, and the fear.

There's not a one of us here who leads a life free of stress and fear. Remember those words of wisdom from Hafiz: *"Fear likes a moving target . . . fear, if it thinks it can't take root in you, (he says) will go somewhere else for easier pickings."* Our devices, wonderful tools though they are, can make us moving targets. Our phones can be life saving but I know that when I let my phone or anything else run me, I can become a moving target and when I do, I risk letting fear take root in my soul.

I am not suggesting that any of us unplug entirely or leave our phones and gadgets at home. I am inviting you, wherever you may go, to remember bring with you something else. I invite all of us, myself included, to listen to the wisdom of Thich Nhat Hanh: just as you take your phone with you wherever you go, he says, take with you also what he calls "mindfulness" – the practice of paying attention to your breath and being present to life. "If we practice mindfulness," he writes, "we always have a place to be when we are afraid Everywhere we go, we will have our practice, so we will have confidence – more confidence than our cell phones can bring us." And so I say, wherever you go, be mindful of your breath, for with it comes the gift of life. If you think you can't pray or meditate, just follow your breath. Focus on your breath. Breathe in; breathe out: that's all it takes to begin the practice of mindfulness. Let your mind and your heart be right where you are, and let your whole being know what it means to be still.

We don't live in easy times. We've been living with financial uncertainty in this country for years, for nearly a decade now. And almost every week, it seems, we hear more news of shootings, events that break our hearts and seem to have no end. Between what goes on around us and all we carry in our own lives, it is only human to feel fearful and anxious at least some of the time. But when fear and anxiety become our default mode, it can be exhausting and demoralizing, says Daniel Smith, whose book is called *Monkey Mind: A Memoir of Anxiety*. "Anxiety," he wrote in a piece for the New York Times, can become what he calls "a habit of mind," But a habit, he says, "is not the same thing as fate." One of the things that has helped him keep anxiety at bay is the practice of mindfulness meditation. We can all find what works for us, he says. Maybe for you it's yoga, or long walks or prayer, or maybe music, or cooking, or working with your hands.

Your spiritual practice need not be a chore or a duty on your list of things to do, it can be a way of "remembering," as the poet teaches, "that pleasure is a thing that needs accomplishing." Your spiritual practice can be a pleasure and pleasure can be your spiritual practice. However you get there, stillness can be a way of listening, in the words of the poet, to the "heart in exile proclaiming that the kingdom still exists," a way of "find(ing) the time to sit out in the sun and listen."

Lest you think I spend hours and hours just sitting and being mindful, let me admit that I don't have that kind of time in my life right now and also that stillness is not my natural state anyway. I like to be on the move and I like to get things done. But I've learned that even when the monsters and beasts and demons and dragons of life seem big and scary, there's no way I can outrun or outwork them no matter how fast I run, no matter how hard I work.

I am learning that stillness and mindfulness can make the heart bigger and stronger and more alive— especially when times are hard and life seems scary. The stillness of mindfulness is not about sitting around and doing nothing – though a bit of that might do most of us some good. Stillness of mind and soul can make us more alive – even when things aren't the best, even when life hurts.

When times are hard, the practice of mindfulness can keep us from falling into the fear and anxiety driven habit of finding fault with all that is and with everyone around us. We can choose to celebrate what is here, the Zen teacher Norman Fischer says, *“even if it's not the best – even if it's not so good. It is,”* he writes, *“and there's a virtue merely in that.”* You can, in the words of Hafiz, *“sit down with a name of God on your tongue, or let your spirit arms reach within you and embrace something sacred there; you might begin to shine.”* You also, I would add, might begin both to love and to live more fully. When we're mindful, we're less fearful, more loving, more alive. When we're mindful, we live with heart. This is true for us, individually, and also as a group, communally, here at our church.

Fear and anxiety can hold us back and keep us from being the best we can be – and this is true both in our lives and in the life of our congregation. But fear can be defeated by facts and the habit of anxiety can be broken by the practice of abundance. Yes, I am talking about money now, our money, yours and mine, the money that allows our church not just to survive, but to thrive.

I'll have more to say along the way but for today, let's start with a few facts. Unlike some congregations, this church has no debt. We owe no one and, unlike some congregations, we haven't even borrowed from our savings. We pay our bills, always on time, and thanks to Jim Bell, we often pay early. Do we get money from outside the church? No, we, the people of the congregation, support our church. Are we, the people, giving enough, right now, to pay for the church we now have? The fact is, no, not quite; we're not giving enough right now to pay for the church we have. But if we all gave a little more, maybe about \$200 per family, right now, we would be even by spring, when we'll start looking together at our future and asking ourselves where we want to go together and what we will need to get there. If we all do what we can, and practice abundance, we will be okay money-wise. Those are the facts. The good news is that no fear, and no old habit like anxiety, can hold us back if we still our minds long enough to see the abundance around us. Our faith here in one another and our faith in what we do together is strong. The questions are: “Where will we go together?” and “Together, what will we do?”

I believe each of us is on this earth to do something. And I believe with all my heart that this congregation, this Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock, is here to do something and, together, we can and we will. After he was diagnosed with cancer, Steve Jobs, the Apple founder and visionary genius, had this to say: *‘Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die (he said) is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.’* My prayer for all of us, for you, for me, for this beloved community, is that we listen deeply to our hearts. Wherever our hearts lead, may we follow. In each of our lives and in our life together, may we “kindle the lamp of love with (our lives).” May we shine.