

# *Fear Not*

A Sermon by Rob Keithan

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## READING

### A LITANY FOR SURVIVAL

By Audre Lorde, from *The Black Unicorn*

For those of us who live at the shoreline  
standing upon the constant edges of decision  
crucial and alone  
for those of us who cannot indulge  
the passing dreams of choice  
who love in doorways coming and going  
in the hours between dawns  
looking inward and outward  
at once before and after  
seeking a now that can breed  
futures  
like bread in our children's mouths  
so their dreams will not reflect  
the death of ours:

For those of us  
who were imprinted with fear  
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads  
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk  
for by this weapon  
this illusion of some safety to be found  
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us  
For all of us  
this instant and this triumph  
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid  
it might not remain  
when the sun sets we are afraid  
it might not rise in the morning  
when our stomachs are full we are afraid  
of indigestion  
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid  
we may never eat again  
when we are loved we are afraid  
love will vanish  
when we are alone we are afraid  
love will never return  
and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
but when we are silent  
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive

## SERMON

Although I usually select my own sermon topics, for today I opened it up to suggestions from members of the worship committee. I wondered if they'd want a light, fun, or quirky subject. You know, like "FEAR." As often happens, though, the process of preparing a sermon has been very meaningful. And so I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on fear—and how we respond to it—and also to look at the relationship between fear and love.

Rev. Forrest Church, who served All Souls Church in New York City for 30 years, is one of the best known UU ministers and authors of our time. A pastor and writer to the end, his last book, entitled *Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow*, was penned in the months following his diagnosis with untreated esophageal cancer and his death from it in September 2009. In the early pages of the book, Church speaks to the real challenges posed by fear, as well as the reason why need to love. He writes:

There are so many instances in our daily lives when our fears stand in the way of our potential to love. How many ways we find to armor and protect ourselves. We sense the risk, of course. That is the main reason we act in the ways we do. Every time we open ourselves up, every time we share ourselves with another, every time we commit ourselves to a cause or a task that awaits our doing, we risk very much. We risk disappointment. We risk failure. We risk being rebuffed or being embarrassed or being inadequate. And beyond these things, we risk the enormous pain of loss (15).

...We pay for love with pain, but love is worth the cost. If we try to protect ourselves from suffering, we shall manage only to subdue the very thing that makes our lives worth living. Though we can, by a refusal of love, protect ourselves from the risk of losing what or whom we love, the irony is, by refusing to love we will have nothing left that is really worth protecting (15).

End Quote. Our task, then, is to love despite fear. It is to live and love fully, not afraid to hold on but not afraid to let go either.

Before we dive into the emotional and spiritual aspects of this challenge, I want to offer a little refresher on how fear actually works in us biologically. I believe that knowing how our bodies work is a good thing in general, and in this case I found it particularly helpful for my own understanding.

According to an article from Discovery Health entitled “How Fear Works<sup>i</sup>,” when our bodies respond to a scary stimulus—say, a loud noise when you’re home alone—there are two processes happening simultaneously. One, which the article calls the low road, is almost instantaneous: it’s a life-saving instinct that gets your body ready to act without knowing what has happened. The other process, the high road, is a longer, more rational process where in you’re actually evaluating the situation. Was the loud noise a burglar, or was it just the wind blowing a trash can against the house?

The fact that these processes take different amounts of time explains why we feel a few seconds of terror after a stimulus: it takes a bit longer for the high road to make an evaluation. No, we don’t need to run out the back door at top speed. But our bodies are ready, in case that is needed.

Now, what’s probably most important for this morning’s topic is that anticipation of problems can cause the body to react in many of the exact same ways. And so fearing loss, disappointment, or failure can put us similarly on edge.

The problem, of course, is that when we act from a place of fear we often end up doing more harm than good. Either we act too hastily, misjudge the situation, fail to see our full range of choices, or we place responsibility in the wrong places for the wrong reasons. Or, we do all of these things and find ourselves in a real mess.

And so, the question is, how can we respond to our fears without being ruled by them? How can we address what needs to be addressed without getting stuck, or making things worse?

The first step, in my view, is to make sure that our intentions are in the right place. What constitutes “right” is, of course, highly subjective. Nonetheless, I want to lift up a general value that I believe we can and should bring to every situation in some degree. Among other things, the source of this value, this principle, serves as a reminder that our current Unitarian Universalist religion comes from a rich history of women and men whose conscience and courage led them to publicly articulate views that were prophetic, powerful, and often wildly unpopular.

It is thus with enormous gratitude and respect that I share with you some of what Hosea Ballou, the most influential figure in early American Universalism, wrote in his essay “The Doctrine of Universal Salvation,” published in 1849. At that time the rising tide of Universalism was strongly opposed by the Calvinists, who believed that only some people were saved and all other were eternally punished.

The part I'm sharing is not so much about what happens in the afterlife as what motivates us in this life. The most relevant Biblical text for Ballou is from the Gospel of Matthew 22:37-40, where to test Jesus a Pharisee asks him "which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus response is "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." <sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

For Ballou, whether or not someone is actually fulfilling these commandments is all about intent. If the reason you're loving God and loving neighbor is simply to avoid Hell, than you're not genuinely satisfying the commandment. You're not acting out of love, as God has instructed, you're acting of fear, according to your own personal concerns.

Ballou's point; his Universalist gospel, is simple: we are called to act out of love. Love for the Holy, and love for our neighbor. I would add love of self to this list also, though, because I believe that treating ourselves well is necessary in order to function effectively in the rest of our lives.

Of course, resolving to act out of love is easier said than done. It's a long journey, and I've chosen to focus on just one part, which is how we deal with fear.

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One of the keys to dealing effectively with fear is accepting that you're feeling it. Trying to avoid or suppress your fear it is not helpful. Another popular, yet equally ineffective response—and I know this one well—is to examine the facts, decide that you have no good rational reason to be scared, and then beat yourself up about it. The problem is that none of these strategies actually address the fear, they just dance around it. Instead, I like the approach offered by the Buddhist monk, writer, and activist Thich Nhat Hanh. He writes:

The first step in dealing with feelings is to recognize each feeling as it arises. The second step is to become one with the feeling. It is best not to say, "Go away, fear. I do not like you. You are not me." It is much more effective to say, "Hello Fear, how are you today?" Then you can invite the two aspects of yourself, mindfulness and fear, to shake hands as friends and become one.

End quote. What an image: shaking hands and making fear our friend. It's such a contrast from how we're taught to relate to fear, but what a difference it can make to simply acknowledge our fears and relate to them calmly. Earlier this week I talked with a friend who's struggling with depression, and her perspective is similar. "Being scared of

depression doesn't make me any less depressed," she said. "It just makes me more scared." So that's strategy one: accept fear and make peace with it.

Strategy two is about developing a more accurate view of what we can control and what we cannot. One way many of us respond to fear is by trying to control, or at least predict, the future. We bet on certain things happening or not happening. Thoughts like "I'm sure that I won't be one of the people laid off," or "It's probably benign," are meant to reassure, but because they relate to things beyond our control it's a dangerous set up.

I believe that we are much better off focusing on our ability to deal with whatever happens. Rather than saying "I'm sure everything will be fine," what if we told ourselves "I can deal with this." Or, better, yet "We, we as a couple, can deal with this. We as a family can deal with this. We as a congregation can deal with this. Whatever happens, we can deal with it."

On January 2<sup>nd</sup>, church member Jan Popp stood in this pulpit and talked about her experience being diagnosed with cancer 14 years ago, successfully fighting it, and then being diagnosed with an even more aggressive form last year. Thankfully, her treatment has gone well and her prognosis is good. As you can imagine, it's led her to do some serious reflection. With her permission, I'm going to share some of her words again, because she speaks directly to the issue of what we cannot control and what can get us through. She writes:

"There are many life changes that put us into this place of uncertainty. Loss of the things and people that are a large part of our lives - divorce, death of a loved one, loss of a job, a close relative or friend moving far away. ...As many of us place much of our identity in relationships and work, this means letting go of parts of who we are.

It takes trust and faith to survive in this 'in between' place. Trust in yourself to know that you are alright underneath all the chaos. Faith that you will come through it and will grow as a result of it. I found faith during the scariest parts of having cancer. I found it in the friend who held my hand while I waited for the scan result. I found it in my sister who kissed me when I woke from surgery. I found it in the dozen people who brought dinner to my house, and in all the caring faces. This very independent woman found faith by letting go of independence and letting people in."

I think Jan is absolutely right. Having faith; having an effective way to get through chaos and fear, requires two kinds of letting: we have to let go of the things we cannot control, and we have to let people in. We *have* to let people in. If there's one common

recommendation in all the literature I've read about dealing with fear, it's that *we have to talk about it*. Remember the words from Audrey Lorde: "when we are silent/we are still afraid/So it is better to speak".

This, in my view, is one of the most basic and most important functions that any religious congregation can perform: to make times and spaces where members can talk to each other about things that really matter. I'm not talking about a few minutes of catching up at coffee hour, either. I'm talking about small group ministries and other ongoing groups where we can really get to know each other. It requires intention on the part of the congregation, in order to make opportunities available, and it requires intention on the part of individuals, to actually take advantage of those opportunities.

But however much intention and effort it takes, I think it's worth it. It's worth it to let go of what we cannot control, it's worth it to accept the reality of fear; it's worth it to speak up about what's really going on in our lives.

What fears are you wrestling with? What do you need to let go of?

Whatever your answers, I hope that you will choose to share them. If not here in the congregation, than with your partner, family, friends, or therapist. Or, of course, your minister.

And, most importantly, I hope that you will choose to love. Love yourself, love your neighbors, and love God—whatever that means for you. Giving in to fear may be tempting, but we are called to something more. Our calling was clear to Hosea Ballou 200 years ago, it was clear to Forrest Church 2 years ago, and I hope it's clear to all of us today. We are called to love. We are called to love.

## **BENEDICTION**

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, [don't let fear get the best of you]. Be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love. (Adapted from 1 Corinthians 16.14-24)

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<sup>i</sup> <http://health.howstuffworks.com/mental-health/human-nature/other-emotions/fear.htm>