



# Driven by Fear

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## THE READING

from FEAR: Essential Wisdom for Getting Through the Storm  
by Thich Nhat Hahn

Many of us don't remember this, but a long time ago, we lived inside our mothers' wombs. We were tiny, living human beings. There were two hearts inside your mother's body: her own heart and your heart, During this time your mother did everything for you; she breathed for you, ate for you, drank for you. You were linked to her through your umbilical cord. Oxygen and food came to you through the umbilical cord, and you were safe and content inside of your mother. You were never too hot or too cold. You were very comfortable. You rested on a soft cushion made of water. In China and Vietnam we call the womb the *palace of the child*. You spent about nine months in the palace. The nine months you spent in the womb were some of the most pleasant times of your life. Then the day of your birth arrived. Everything felt different around you, and you were thrust into a new environment. You felt cold and hunger for the first time. Sounds were too loud; lights were too bright. For the first time, you felt afraid. This is original fear.

Inside the palace of the child you didn't need to use your own lungs. But at the moment of your birth, someone cut the umbilical cord and you were no longer physically joined with your mother. Your mother could no longer breathe for you. You had to learn to breathe on your own for the first time. If you couldn't breathe on your own, you would die. Birth was a very precarious time. You were pushed out of the palace, and you encountered suffering. You tried to inhale, but it was difficult. . . . We were born, and with that birth, our fear was born along with the desire to survive. This is original desire. As infants, each one of us knew that to survive, we had to get someone to take care of us. Even after the umbilical cord was cut, we still had to rely entirely on adults to survive . . .

When we grow up, our original fear and original desire are still there. Although we are no longer babies, we still fear that we cannot survive, that no one will take care of us. Every desire we will have in our lives has its root in this original, fundamental desire to survive. As babies, we all find ways to ensure our survival. We may have felt very powerless. We had legs but couldn't walk. We had hands, but couldn't grasp anything. We had to figure out how to get someone else to protect us, take care of us, and ensure our survival.

Everyone is afraid sometimes. We fear loneliness, being abandoned, growing old, dying, and being sick, among many other things. Sometimes we may feel fear without knowing exactly why. If we practice looking deeply, we see that this fear is the result of that original fear from the time we were newborns, helpless and unable to do anything for

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ourselves. Even though we have grown into adults, that original fear and original desire are both still alive.

## THE SERMON

[not all negative]

According to my Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, Fear is:

.... *an unpleasant emotional state characterized by anticipation of pain or great distress and accompanied by heightened autonomic activity, especially involving the nervous system: agitated foreboding often of some real or specific peril.*

Indeed, our association with the word "fear" is often thought of as unpleasant. That is, however, only a part of the story. Salman Akhtar, in his book **Fear: a Dark Shadow Across our Life Span** makes it clear that:

*Fear, as an innate internal signal, is indispensable for safe and successful conduct of behavior in the service of survival. Without fear, we would be at the mercy of daily mishaps and ordinary dangers of everyday life . . . In [humans] as well as in lower animals, the brain's subcortical and limbic areas, sometimes called the "reptilian brain," scan, register, and diagnose fear nearly instantly or even before the emerging danger is actually present as an anticipatory preparation for fight-or flight response.*

At the same time, he points out:

*Fear, when unrelieved or indefinitely extended, can lead to stress-related distress and a chronic state of anxiety . . .*

The psychiatrist Joseph Wolpe asserts :

*Useful fears function largely as a signaling device, directing us to the presence of a danger to be dealt with. They prompt worthwhile action: to see a doctor for chest pain, to leave for home before the blizzard that is forecast, to slow down on the expressway, or to take whatever other protective action may be relevant. In any activity that presents a sequence of dangers, fear focuses our attention on the hazards of each moment. . . .*

[not all positive]

The problem is, there are times when fear is **not** a response "to a real and specific peril" but a response to an imagined peril. It may, nonetheless become a dominant feature in some people's lives and even sometimes a driving factor.

For years, my eldest daughter, Lisa, did almost all the worrying for our family. She started out incredibly, almost recklessly, confident. When she was tiny, it was dangerous taking her to a mall because she was so fearless that she would walk off if she was not watched closely. That changed radically: I link it to the death of our infant son at three months when Lisa was four, and she became a textbook case of the fearful person. Lisa couldn't enjoy eating in a restaurant because she was afraid our car would have been towed by the time we left. She was always afraid that we would get lost. She worried that she wouldn't do things perfectly. She was afraid she had flunked tests in which she actually earned A's.

Thankfully, Lisa was eventually able to get her worrying under control. Some people never do. Lisa's fears were not congruent with her real life situation – they were not based on real threats to her safety, but they were a driving force in her life..

[reality-based fears]

There are, of course, people who are living in countries where their lives are in constant danger - from war, or tyrannical governments, or poverty. For instance, if you live in a Central American country where you have been displaced from the farmland on which you lived and eked out a living, because a multinational corporation or gangs or, combining both, drug lords have taken over the land and you don't know where your family's next meal is going to come from or when a family member will be kidnaped, it is understandable that you might be fearful: your life is, indeed, in jeopardy. Many such people are risking everything to try to find refuge in what was, at one time, a welcoming country which said:

*"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

That welcome mat has, as we know, been withdrawn, the lamp is no longer shining "beside the golden door." [More about that later.]

It is interesting, however, that people who have comparatively much actually seem to experience more fear than people who have little. Surveys have suggested that Americans, living in the wealthiest, most powerful nation on earth, are the most fearful people on earth - in fact one writer referred to ours as "the most anxious, frightened society in history."

[existential fear]

Some theologians have stressed the "existential" fear that comes with human awareness. My late colleague Forrest Church suggested that the basis of religion was our confrontation with the knowledge that we have been born and that we shall die. Some, like psychoanalyst and humanistic philosopher Erich Fromm, believe that the fear of death is humanity's fundamental driving force, and that our attempts to gather riches, and have sensual experiences, and to create, are all manifestations of our attempts to stave off death.

Offering a respite from the fear of death has often been a central feature used by religion to control people. Much of the opposition to the teaching of Universal Salvation by our Universalist spiritual ancestors was based on the concern that without fear of Hell, the traditional churches could not be sustained.

As I consider the people in congregations I've served who have faced death with equanimity and even relief, I am not convinced that the fear of death is as universal or as powerful as some believe, which is not to deny that it is a major fear factor for many people.

And there is the fear cherished by many Evangelical Christians that there is a war against their religion, which is verified by the number of people leaving their churches. Science is the feared enemy for them. And they are not entirely wrong.

[personal fear]

There are people who live with the driving fear that they are: not good enough, not attractive enough, not smart enough, not sexy enough, not strong enough, not successful enough to make it through life. I'm talking here about those who live in constant fear, compelling fear, that they are unworthy. This fear manifests itself in phobias that restrict some people's ability to enjoy life. They avoid taking any risks. They find fault with others in a futile attempt to reassure themselves that while they may be bad, there are worse. Life becomes a burden rather than an adventure. They face each new day with thoughts of how badly it could go for them. Such fear is the enemy of reason because when it kicks in, reason is forced out the door.

In a real sense, the business of therapy, in its various forms, is helping people to address and deal with the fears that drive their lives.

Thom Rutledge, in his book **Embracing Fear** and Finding the Courage to Live Your Life, insists we cannot eliminate fear, but we can transform our relationship with it. He uses FEAR as an acronym: Face it, Explore it, Accept it, and Respond to it.

*Facing the fear means that we end the running, cringing, and hiding from the scary voice within us that will always find us no matter where we run or where we hide. Exploring it means that we turn and walk toward the big scary bully. . . . Accepting it, contrary to popular misconception does not mean we agree with the fear or that we like it. To accept is simply to realize that there are some things we cannot change. . . . Responding to our neurotic fears is what it is all about, but the ability to change can only be built on the foundation of the first three steps.*

It is possible to address those personal fears and to free ourselves from the bonds they create that restrict our living.

[social fears]

It is important to realize that beyond those personal fears, there are also socially generated ones. Dr. James Gilligan, in his book on **Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic**, suggests that it is important to look at who benefits from the violence in our society. It is his contention that the very wealthy benefit from having the middle class distracted from the power of the wealthy, and that is accomplished by keeping the middle class in fear of the lower class.

I recently saw a political cartoon on the internet which showed three people sitting at a table. One person had stacks of cookies in front of them. The person beside the hoarder had one cookie, and the third person had none. The person with the stacks of cookies is warning the one beside him, "Watch out for the person beside you who may try to steal your cookie!" This is our 1%!

Gilligan asserts:

*By getting the middle class worried about and afraid of those below them, we don't look up; and those on the bottom are distracted by the middle class from focusing their anger on the very rich.*

Fear has become ever more pervasive in our society. David Altheide has studied how the media play a central role in increasing our fear of one another. Part of it is through the news, and part is through the so-called entertainment. When you look at it through Altheide's eyes, you become somewhat suspicious of the various crime shows and even local news coverage. With the crime they bring into our homes hour after hour, the inevitable impact is

that they make us more fearful, and therefore more willing to surrender freedoms to the police and courts that “protect us” from that crime. The media are controlled by the 1%.

[political fear]

And then there is the political sphere.

During his first inaugural address, in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt told the American people:

*I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision which the present situation of our Nation impels. This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself--nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory.*

Eight years later, in his State of the Union Address, FDR said:

*In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.*

*The first is freedom of speech and expression--everywhere in the world.*

*The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way--everywhere in the world.*

*The third is freedom from want--which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants--everywhere in the world.*

*The fourth is freedom from fear--which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor--anywhere in the world. [note he did not say any nation but ours, but “no nation”!]*

*That [FDR said] is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation. That kind of world is the very antithesis of the so-called new order of tyranny which the dictators seek to create with the crash of a bomb.*

[political manipulation]

There have been many politicians, Democrat and Republican, who have used fear to manipulate the American people.

I still remember when I was in grade school and we had those “duck and cover drills” that were ostensibly supposed to protect us from nuclear attacks. Even when I was eight, I was suspicious. I could see that ducking and covering was not going to do any good at all if an atomic bomb hit Albany. So what was the point? It seemed as if it was all about making us afraid and politically pliable. Today's searches at airports seem similar – a way to make us afraid.

It was the Democrat, LBJ who ran one of the first major fear creating television ads. Do you remember "Daisys"? According to Wikipedia:

*The advertisement began with a little girl standing in a meadow with chirping birds, picking the petals of what appears to be a daisy flower while counting each petal slowly. Because little Monique does not know her numbers perfectly, she repeats some and says others in the wrong order, all of which adds to her childlike appeal. When she reaches "nine", an ominous-sounding male voice is then heard counting down a missile launch, and as the girl's eyes turn toward something she sees in the sky, the camera zooms in until her pupil fills the screen, blacking it out. When the countdown reaches zero, the blackness is replaced by the flash and mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion.*

*As the firestorm rages, a voiceover from Johnson states, "These are the stakes! To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die." Another voiceover (sportscaster Chris Schenkel) then says, "Vote for President Johnson on November 3. The stakes are too high for you to stay home."*

The attack ad was designed to capitalize on comments made by Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater about the possibility of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam.

It worked. LBJ won by a landslide. I still remember the televised fireside chat from the White House when LBJ warned us that we, in America, have what everyone else in the world wants, and we are not going to let them take it from us. [The message: be afraid!]

And then there was the blatantly racist, fear-mongering Willy Horton Ad from George HWBush's campaign against Michael Dukakis.

[Bush]

I would suggest that no prior American politicians had approached the grossness of the use of fear by the George W. Bush administration - remember the color code of warnings of the danger we were allegedly in. Fear was used as the basis for suspending many of the Constitutional guarantees of freedom, and there are people who said they were prepared to grant those suspensions to "protect the American people" – a phrase that was repeated time and again by administration spokespeople, just as they reiterated, time and again, before our invasion of Iraq, the date "9/11" and the words "mushroom cloud" in order to produce support, although neither of those bore any relationship to Iraq – and they knew it.

[Gore]

Al Gore, in his 2007 book **Assault on Reason**, cited the Roman philosopher Lactantius who wrote, "Where fear is present, wisdom cannot be." Gore asked:

*Is America in more danger now than when we faced worldwide fascism on the march – when our fathers fought and won a world war on two fronts simultaneously? . . .*

*[S]omething is palpably different today. Why in the early years of the twenty-first century are we so much more vulnerable to the politics of fear? There have always been leaders willing to fan public anxieties in order to present themselves as protectors of the fearful. Demagogues have always promised security in return for the surrender of freedom . . .*

*[Gore wrote] The single most surprising new element in America's national conversation is the prominence and intensity of constant fear. Moreover, there is an uncharacteristic and persistent confusion about the sources of that fear; we seem to be having unusual difficulty in distinguishing between illusory threats and legitimate ones.*

*In a democracy, the common (if usually unstated) assumption is that citizens operate as rational human beings, reasoning their way through the problems presented to them as if every question could be analyzed rationally and debated fairly until there is a well-reasoned collective conclusion. But the new [brain] research demonstrates that, of course, that is not the way it works at all.*

*[Gore went on to observe:]*

*When human beings developed a higher order of thinking, we gained an advantage in being able to anticipate emerging threats. We gained the ability to conceptualize threats instead of just perceiving them. But we also gained the ability to conceptualize imaginary threats. And when groups of people are persuaded to conceptualize these imaginary threats, they can activate the fear response as powerfully as would real threats.*

*[Wallis]*

In his new book, **Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus**, the religiously conservative but socially liberal Evangelical leader, Jim Wallis devotes a chapter to the "The Fear Question." Pointing out that

*. . . the assurance of "do not be afraid" is the most often repeated command in the Bible: 365 scriptures command us to not fear or be afraid in reaction to the world, to people, to the events around us . . .*

Wallis asserts:

*Not succumbing to fear allows us to seek and find peace of heart and mind. The deepest contrast to the anxiety that fear creates is joy. The alternative to the anxious life is the joyous life. Living with the "spirit of cowardice," always experiencing the "dread of danger" is what "shrinks" our humanity. Only the power of love can counter that along with a "sound mind" or "self-control." Living in a spirit of fear is not healthy and can actually dehumanize us if we submit to fear's control . . .*

*Fear can lead us to do terrible things to others, because being afraid of "others" who are "different" than we are seems to be a common human fear. And that fear can be easily, brutally, and horrifically used by political leaders to engage in discrimination and violence against the people who are different from "us."*

Oscar Hammerstein, in commenting on "It's Got to be Taught" – the song from South Pacific which Karen sang as the Interlude – wrote:

*I am most anxious to make the point not only that prejudice exists and is a problem, but that its birth lies in teaching and not in the belief that there are basic biological and physiological and mental differences between races."*

At the time South Pacific was touring in the South, Georgia legislators introduced a bill outlawing entertainment containing "an underlying philosophy inspired by Moscow." One legislator said that "a song justifying interracial marriage was implicitly a threat to the American way of life."



Wallis continues:

*All too often, political leaders use and manipulate fear to turn people against their opponents and enemies for their own political advantage. One of the most graphic and grotesque uses of fear is what the current administration has done in the deportation of immigrants and the brutal treatment of asylum seekers coming to this country.*

*We continue to see presidential rallies that are hard to watch, and tweets that are hard to read, but what they clearly and significantly reveal is a political strategy of fear based on continual and unapologetic lying, which deliberately evokes racial resentment and hatred. And as we have now painfully seen, such hatred and fear lead to violence.*

*[Chalmers Johnson]*

Chalmers Johnson, in his book **The Age of Anxiety: McCarthyism to Terrorism**, suggests we face a twofold challenge in the political realm:

*First, not to be so overcome by fear that we overreact. We have already progressed down this road in the years since 9/11, which have been symbolized by the Patriot Act. Enacting repressive security measures, imposing security edicts for which no one is publicly accountable, and creating a climate of obsessive secrecy creates abuses against liberty rather than greater safety. These actions change the nature, and the promise, of our democracy. In allowing them, we risk becoming like the enemies we combat.*

*Second, not to let fear blind us to a greater task necessary for providing national security: employing our best talents and energies toward eradicating the sources of the hatred that threatens us. True security requires not merely the ability to amass weapons and launch successful combat operations. It requires working to ameliorate the conditions that breed terrorism: poverty ignorance, isolation, intolerance.*

[That sure sounds like what FDR told us 80 years ago!]

Many today believe that it is important to maintain a home arsenal in order to be prepared to resist a tyrannical government or hordes of dark-skinned people who seek to harm us. The acquisition of military equipment by local police forces certainly adds a measure of reality to those fears.

And we are told that attempts to provide greater economic equity are a threat to our freedom – how dare we try to share the wealth of the 1% among the people? How dare we seek to guarantee health care and education and nutrition to the 90% who are left out? Those are the demons of Communism or Socialism!

I have to confess that the irrationality of the present administration, the insanity of many of its actions, have elicited a level of fear in me that exceeds any I have experienced in the past. This week I have spent many hours in front of the tv, watching the impeachment trial of the person in the White House. I also have been reading **A Very Stable Genius**. [I highly recommend the ironically titled new book on the president by Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig,] These provide substantial reasons for us to fear for our nation. I have faced the temptation to go to bed and pull the covers up over my head, but that would enable fear to drive us and prevent us from effectively facing the challenges, which would make us complicit in the defeat of our values.

For eight decades, this church has served members of my family as a safe harbor as we have been buffeted by the personal, social and political fears that have threatened to disable

us. It is a place where we have turned to be assured by our brothers and sisters that we are not crazy as we try to apply reason to our experiences as we turn away from boogie-men and try to address the real threats we face. We have been supported in that process by this community which has provided us with people we could lean on, and we have at times been here to be leaned on. It has made a difference in our lives for which I am thankful.

We face many fears in our lives: personal, social and political. Dealing with them is similar in every context – not to deny them, but to face them, explore them, accept them, and respond to them – to refuse to allow the primitive areas of our brain to blind us to the use of our reason so we can respond constructively.

*[hope]*

Harriet Lerner, in her book **The Dance of Fear**, has suggested:

*The best we can do with fear is to befriend it. That is, we can learn to expect, allow, and accept fear, watch it mindfully, and understand that fear will always reappear . . . We needn't let anxiety and shame silence our authentic voices, close our hearts to the different voices of others, or stop us from acting with clarity, compassion and courage. In today's world, no challenge is more important than that.*

I'm going to give the last words to Jim Wallis who concludes his chapter on Fear saying:

*When fear can be used and spread with no accountability to any facts, it increases the "spirit of fear" of which our scriptures warn, because such fears do seed the ground for hate, which sets the motivation for violence. We see where the spirit of fear leads.*

*[Wallis asserts] In such a time, the conviction that the spirit of Love can overcome the spirit of fear must be in action, confronting the false fear mongers in our media, our politics at our dinner tables, in our lives, and even in our congregations. For the health of the nation, a "sound mind" must be made to flourish – we must think and love without fear. This is such a time of fear in our country and around the world. Overcoming the dangerous spirit of fear becomes a central commitment . . .*

Amen