

Fear and Faith, A Personal Exploration

Bob Prescott - 3/30/2008

After I'd finished **one** of the many drafts of this sermon, I was talking with my stepmother, and I described it to her. She said: It sounds like you're giving a **testimony**. I wasn't really sure what a testimony was. I imagined it was what she experienced growing up in Kentucky. It turns out it's a talk about your faith and why you're a Christian and how you avoided sin and such. So maybe this is my testimony, without the sin and the Christianity.

The truth is I started with the topic of **fear**, as broad a topic as I could come up with, because I like the topic. I mean: we all have our fears and I believe how we deal with those fears determines, to an extent, who we become. However, I soon realized that the topic was so broad I could barely scratch the surface, so I settled for what I know: My own fears. My own experiences. **My testimony**.

What triggered this examination was The Lenten Diet in this month's UU World.

A Lenten Diet - Exerpt From March 2008 UUWorld

By John B. Wolf

Fast from criticism, and feast on praise;
Fast from self-pity, and feast on joy;
Fast from ill-temper, and feast on peace;
Fast from resentment, and feast on contentment;
Fast from jealousy, and feast on love;
Fast from pride, and feast on humility;
Fast from selfishness, and feast on service;
Fast from fear, and feast on faith

It sounds like a recipe for happiness. But what caught my attention was the last line: **Fast** from **Fear**, and Feast on **Faith**. I've heard something similar in other contexts, and other venues. I've always understood it as requiring a belief in some kind of higher power, typically God or Jesus.

The 23rd Psalm.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will **fear** no evil: For thou art with me;

-God will allay our fears if only we have faith in Him.

Having become agnostic over time, however, I didn't really buy into the prospect of a personal God. I'd had my fears and they were not assuaged by religious guidance. Rather they were stuffed away and avoided. Experience taught me, and this is almost too easy, that the things I feared - were things to be avoided.

So let me begin my testimony. I won't pretend I have any answers. My goal is a simple examination of three events in my life from which I gained a better understanding of faith and fear. The **first story** I'd like to relate occurred when I was a young boy. Every kid grows up fearing monsters under the bed, and I'm sure I went thru that. I just can't recall. I don't have many childhood memories. What haunted me from my youth and into adulthood was a **fear of Public Speaking**. How appropriate! Yes, public speaking terrified me and shaped my behavior for years to come.

I was in Jr High School. And in Jr. High School, they don't give you a whole lot of latitude. If you're supposed to give a speech, you give a speech. There's not an option of building a diarama, or writing a report. It's no: You have to give a speech. Now, it could be that I was new in the school and I didn't know anyone, didn't know the system, wore funny clothers, I don't know. But the point was: I was giving a speech. I was told it was something I **needed** to learn to do.

I wrote the speech. I was terrified, and can remember actually trembling in preparation. It was a ten minute speech, or a five minute speech; I don't remember. What I remember is trudging to the front of the class, eyes to the floor. I delivered the speech in a heartbeat. It all came out. I vomited the speech (not literally, of course) and ran back to my desk and sat down. My heart was racing, I was sweating. The room was quiet. And the relief I felt was indescribable. This was **not** a growing experience. I had achieved no comfort from having completed this task. From that point forward, I did whatever I could to avoid speaking before others.

So. Many years later, after finishing school, I went to work for the government. And I had an ideal job. I filed papers and talked on the phone. I was trained to work with computers, and I sat in front of a terminal all day. It was a perfect job for a pencil-necked introvert. And over time, I became comfortable in my job. I was pretty good. It was a small pond, but I was pretty good. And one day I was asked if I could help teach a class. The computer age was dawning. Everyone needed to learn some basic computer skills, and our contractor money had run out. So I volunteered, along with a buddy. It was very easy. It was very informal. We were

computer gurus in the land of the computer illiterate. We had scripts, we were excused from our regular work. Everyone loved us. And we had a pretty good time.

Some time later, after learning a new programming language, I developed a class on my own. And because I had this comfort level from my earlier experiences, I was at ease standing in front of a class and teaching. The Agency I worked for in Washington, sent me to Houston, where I spent a week teaching strangers how to program. Everyone wanted to learn. I received lots of strokes. It was a week of positive reinforcement. And some students actually got new jobs because of the class. Or so I was told. It was **one** of the best experiences of my life.

The moral of this story tho, was that the **faith** I had in overcoming this **fear** was a **faith in myself**. I developed self-confidence from experience. And I was able to deal with something which was overwhelming at one point in my life. Some of it might be simply maturity. But I always had the option of withdrawing and nurturing that fear. **Faith in myself** allowed me to embrace the opportunities which led to personal growth.

So that was my first little story. My first **fear bubble** and the faith which **popped** it.

My **second story** focuses on a common fear. I suspect it's responsible for the high level of church attendance. Once again I'll start with the confusion of my youth. I grew up Catholic, and Catholicism, like most most religions, had **all** the answers relating to **death**. **Fear of death**, and especially what

happens after we die, were topics of morbid fascination. Fear of hell, fear of purgatory, kept me on the straight and narrow. I was baptised, had my first communion, and my confirmation. I had all my tickets punched for the afterlife.

However, when I was a little older, and more of a smartass, that early indoctrination by the church became less important. But the possibility of an eternity of pain still lingered.

After I finished college, I moved to Tucson Arizona and worked a steady stream of crappy jobs, mostly involving construction. And on **one** particular day, I was returning from a job way outside of town. It was hot, and I was tired, and the truck had no radio and no air conditioning. And I fell asleep.

It was so easy to fall asleep. And I guess I woke up after I went thru the guardrail. Something woke me up. And I figured out what was going on pretty quickly. I was going to die. And I guess there was a moment of fear, or anxiety. I mean: I was going to die. But what I remember is something like my final accounting.

I didn't pray. I had a **mind dump** which began with terrific regret. I had such high expectations of what I'd do and who I'd become and those expectations would never be realized. I felt that I'd let down my father. That was a big one for me. My **mother** died after I finished high school, and I had a very strong **need** to make my father happy. And, adding insult to all of my other screwups, here was the final disappointment. It was pretty devastating. Pretty sorry stuff. But then! I had this overwhelming sense of

relief. All of the sadness, all of the regret **evaporated**. It was my epiphany. It was over. Nothing mattered, it was done. Resignation. Acceptance. The best feeling anyone could ever have. And then I crashed.

That epiphany became one of the central tenants of **my** faith. I'm not afraid of death. I'm fearful of pain. I fear the dentist. I fear suffering. I think those are primal fears. I have accepted, **on faith**, that death is an absence of pain, of suffering.

I'm reluctant, however, to share this belief, sometimes, because it sounds fatalistic. My life is better than anything I ever imagined. I certainly wouldn't give it up willingly, but I'm not fearful of its conclusion. I have **faith** in this belief.

I actually tried to research the topic of Fear and Faith, and there is one thing I ran across that I'd like to share. It kind of fits here. It's a Spanish Proverb which goes: He who fears death cannot enjoy life. Lucky me.

So. Story number three. Rosa suggested our Wedding Day. Our wedding day was one terrifying trip for Bachelor Bob. I was in love with my best friend and we were going to be married, and my life would soon be over. Absolute, abject terror. Who among us doesn't fear an end of their freedom? What man among us has not dreamt of being Hugh Hefner? Of living a life of unattainable pleasure. Well. **That** wasn't going to happen! After fighting all morning, we stopped at Dennys for a Grand Slam and talked it out. Heart to heart, punctuated by tears and smiles. Together, we conquered

my fears. My life's exceeded all of my dreams. I'm not the same jackass Rosa married. I'm much older now.

But I told my dear wife that I wouldn't use our wedding as my third story. No. I'm sure you've seen Rosa come up and light a candle for her niece, Evelyn. Evelyn has ovarian cancer. I wasn't going to mention Evelyn because I wanted to limit this to my personal fears and faith. But I bought a safe recently, a fire-proof safe for our belongings. I've rounded up all of our important documents, and our passports, and whatnot and put them in this fireproof safe – for safekeeping. And I was going thru some of the papers, and found copies of all kinds of stuff my dad had given me. One of the documents was a copy of my mother's death certificate. My mother died of ovarian cancer in 1969. She had cancer for 22 months. She received the best care the country could provide. And the dominant memories I have of my mother involve suffering, and hospitals, and spiders on the walls. To this day, I can visualize the needles used to drain her abdomen. So that's my **big fear**. Cancer. It's not the dying, it's the suffering. I don't think I have the stomach for what my mother endured. I've certainly anticipated an easier way out.

But watching Evelyn, I've had to rethink things. Evelyn's had ovarian cancer for five years. And her progress has been a mixture of hopes and setbacks. I **didn't** expect to be here today. I expected Rosa and I would be on an emergency trip to Miami. Evelyn had her lungs drained last week. She was in the hospital eighteen days. No one knew what to expect, and the doctors made no promises. But she's back home now, happy to be out of the hospital.

When I spoke with her, she started the conversation a little weak, but quickly became excited, relating her plans. She told me she wants to set up a business to create and sell organic note cards, with the proceeds benefitting the American Cancer Society. She'll soon be starting chemo again.

She knew I was writing a speech for the UU and offered to help. Actually, she kicked my ass for procrastinating so long. I'd mentioned I was writing it before her trip to the hospital, and I'd had many false starts. Anyway, this is what she told me. She said that fear and faith are both essential. Fear is evil, and weakens. It is self-doubt. Faith is what makes us fight. Both are necessary. Both fear and faith. She might be right. She has her fears, as well she should. She's definitely a fighter.

So. Where does her faith come from? Evelyn is both optimistic and realistic. She is taking the time to teach her son the lessons of her life. Her faith, and her belief in the natural order of life, have helped her endure a staggering challenge.

I've seen a lot of people endure the unimaginable. I'm sure everyone here has similar stories. And I don't know what gives someone the strength to deal with such pain and suffering. Faith, it seems, makes it all bearable.

As far as my faith is concerned, and what became evident in compiling this little testimony, is that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Regardless of what we ask ourselves to endure, there is relief in the end. Of course, that's

just my read. I could be wrong. I don't care. I have faith that I'm right on this one.

There's plenty of time for coffee.