

## Pirates and Possums: Considering Fear

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*If you have to be afraid of something, pirates and possums might be two reasonable things to be afraid of—or maybe not. Come join us and Sara Mackey for a reflection on the pervasive presence of fear in our culture, and the spiritual practice of freeing oneself from the power of fear.*

Last winter I watched a movie called *Captain Phillips*, which was based on a true story and starred Tom Hanks as the captain of a ship which was taken over by Somali pirates. The movie affected and disturbed me far more than I realized, but it took a couple of days for me to discover that. In my job at the seminary, I am often one of the first to arrive, and if I've brought a lunch, I go down to the break room as soon as I get there, put my lunch in the fridge, and make coffee. The break room stays locked, and all the library employees have keys, but nobody else does. One morning, soon after I had watched *Captain Phillips*, I was downstairs making coffee when somebody turned the doorknob, then—I presume-- walked away when the door didn't open. The library was still closed, so nobody in the building should have expected to get into that room without a key. Whoever was out there jiggling the knob instead of unlocking the door wasn't supposed to be there. Deep in my brain something said, "Somali pirates!" Now, I'm an educated woman and my intellect knew perfectly well that there were no Somali pirates on the campus of Union Presbyterian Seminary. But the part of my brain that was not my intellect threw out that suggestion without hesitation, and it made me, for just a second at least, scared.

What makes us afraid? Any number of stimuli can trigger our fear, but many times the fear itself exists separate and distinct from the circumstance or object that makes us afraid. The fear triggered in me by that movie transferred itself to somebody jiggling the door handle of the break room, although the two experiences were totally unrelated. When FDR said we had nothing to fear but fear itself, he knew what he was talking about. If you spend any time with the Christian sacred text, you will find that a recurring command, from many sources, is "do not be afraid". It's all throughout both

Old and New Testaments, and although I can't prove it, I believe the person who said it's the most frequently repeated command in the Bible. And we all can see that those are the first spoken words in the Christmas story...there's an enticing narrative about shepherds and flocks and an incredible vision—a heavenly host—and a messenger angel who says, first thing, “Do not be afraid.” The beginning of this transformative announcement of good news, a big change that's about to happen, a radical difference in the way of life people have experienced up until that point...the beginning of the announcement is “do not be afraid”.

We can imagine that the fear experienced by the characters in the Christmas story was biologically sound. It's a natural physiological reaction to be afraid if a creature you've never seen before all of a sudden appears in front of you. It's natural to experience fear if you hear a loud knock on your door in the middle of the night, or if you're in a car wreck, or if somebody threatens you. We can characterize that kind of visceral fear as situational. It's beyond our control, and most likely it's to our evolutionary advantage. That's not the fear that damages our spirits, though. The fear I mean is the generic, undefined, non-specific fear that stands in the way of our well-being and often has little basis in reality. It's natural, for example, to experience fear if a car runs a red light and smashes into my car. If I'm afraid to drive a month later, though, that fear isn't helping me, and in fact it's getting in my way. We don't need fear that does not protect our survival, and we don't have to bear the burden of it. Once we become aware of what makes us afraid, and even more importantly, aware of the way our culture currently tries to insist that we be afraid of something, anything, doesn't matter what...once we become aware of that, we can name and recognize the presence of fear in our consciousness. When we can do that naming—when we can say I am afraid, I am afraid of this specific thing, does this specific thing actually threaten me in this moment?—when the answer to *that* question is no, then the way is open for us to begin the transformative spiritual practice of not being afraid.

There are some steps to take to prepare ourselves for this practice. In the Christian sacred text, when people are told, “Do not be afraid”, they are being invited

into a freedom from fear that is based on faith in God and God's ever present care. What about people who don't believe in God? Then the question becomes, what do you believe in? Do you believe in the power of benevolent forces in the universe?—and I'm talking here about such things as caring for each other, being good neighbors, raising children with hope. I'm talking about planting vegetables or flowers with the expectation that they will grow, traveling to new places with the expectation of good experiences...I could go on and on. If you do not believe in goodness as a powerful presence in the world, can you change your mind about that? Do you want to change your mind about that? Can you *decide* that there are benevolent forces at work in the universe, and then act as if that decision is valid? I know people who can't seem to do that, and who apparently want, even cherish, problems, enemies, troubles. It is my conviction that on some level that world view is indicative of an identifiable condition that can be healed, but the healing is, of course, inextricably bound to the recognition that healing is possible.

Beyond our own personal perspectives, we need to be aware, as I mentioned earlier, of the demand our culture places on us to be afraid. Every time we look at social media or news media, we see attention being given to some disaster. It doesn't have to be anything related to us, it can be some disaster in another part of the world. But we can hardly look at any kind of screen without seeing somebody getting blown up or falling off a cliff or being eaten by a shark. Watch out, watch out, we are told, day and night—this might happen to you. Your identity might get stolen, an escaped prisoner might kill you, you might die without enough life insurance to pay for your funeral. We seem to be taught subliminally that it's irresponsible *not* to be afraid, and yet the logic, or lack of logic, about what we're supposed to be afraid of eludes us. Someone came to my house years ago going door to door to sell home security systems, which she assured me were vital to my safety and security. She asked me which threat I was most afraid of: fire, home invasion, or medical emergency. I told her I wasn't afraid of any of those things, and I didn't really feel the need for a home security system...I felt secure without one. She was stumped; she couldn't get any further in her sales pitch unless the potential buyer was afraid of something. And in spite of this woman's effort to convince

me otherwise, I have lived in that house for more than fifteen years without ever having a fire or a home invasion or a medical emergency.

How do we turn away that irrational fear? How do we engage in the spiritual practice of resisting fear? Spiritual practice, of course, is well named. Above all, it takes practice. First of all we need to notice and name our fear and where it comes from. Who's telling us to be afraid? Why? Who is potentially making a profit from our fear? What are the chances that what we're told to fear is actually going to happen? The fear is easy to resist once we've identified it and looked at it full in the face. It becomes easier and easier to recognize, and much less powerful, as we practice watching for it.

Once we can recognize when fear has a grip on us, we begin the process of freeing ourselves from that grip. We start by realizing that the fear is not useful and will not serve our needs. Even when fear is valid—for example, fear associated with a bad diagnosis for ourselves or somebody dear to us—that fear does not help. It doesn't do good, it doesn't change anything, and it takes a lot of energy that could be more productive elsewhere. Once we have named the fear that affects us and have recognized that it doesn't serve our needs, then the next step is a simple statement to ourselves, the one so often repeated in the sacred text: do not be afraid. I find that along with this mantra, it helps to breathe slowly and deeply. We know that we can change the way we feel by changing the way we breathe, so it's always useful to pay attention to our breathing as we consciously resist fear.

For me, this practice is especially productive when I'm driving. I really do not like to drive, and I have this irrational anxiety that I won't be able to make my car fit in with all the other cars on the road, especially when I have to merge on to the highway, going faster than I want to go. Although my anxiety does not go away, I can relax its hold on me by breathing slowly and saying, "do not be afraid" as I approach the place I wish I could avoid. The fear is still there, but its power over me is diminished. I hope that as I gain more and more practice—this is a spiritual *practice*, after all—I will have less anxiety on the highway.

Early in the summer, an opportunity arose that affirmed for me the progress I was making with my spiritual practice of resisting fear. My dog, who is a gentle, plodding, quiet soul, turns into a rocket-charged killing machine when she sees a possum. I have no idea what experience from her past makes her such a possum-hater, but it's unnerving—chilling, in fact-- to watch how fast she changes into a ferocious wild beast when she catches and kills a possum. One night I let her out in the back yard and went around to the front to water the plants. When I came back in and opened the back door for her, she burst into the house with a possum in her mouth. The possum was still alive, much to my horror, and the dog dropped it on the floor and looked at me happily. Introverts, as you know, need time to think things through, and when there is a possum in your kitchen blinking at you, thinking time is a luxury you have to give up. I had to act. First I carried the dog into my room and shut the door so she couldn't finish the possum off right there in the kitchen. Next I had to catch the cats, who were absolutely riveted; they had never seen such a creature before. I didn't know what they would do, and I was afraid they would get into a fight with the possum. They didn't want to be caught, of course; they were too wired. So I had to chase them, catch one cat and put it in the bathroom, then catch the second cat and put it in the bathroom while the first cat shot out the door and went back to stare, fur standing on end, at the possum. After several rounds of cat-catching, the dog and both cats were safely stowed away, and I was able to go back and locate the possum, who had made its way into the living room by then and was quietly huddled in a corner. I began the slow, deep breathing that changes the way you feel, and I began, at last, to think. There's a possum in the house, it can't stay here, now what do I do. Eventually I decided to remove the possum using the same principle you would use to remove a bug: put a cup over it and slide a piece of paper under it. With a possum you have to transfer the skill to a much larger scale, but I did have a big plastic box and the cutting mat I use for cutting fabric. I put the box over the possum, who stood still inside it, much to my relief, and I slid the cutting mat an inch at a time under the box. Once I got the possum contained, all I had to do was move it slowly and carefully, scooting it through the kitchen, on to the stoop, and finally into the yard. It was only after everybody was back to normal, relatively speaking, that I realized

I had not been afraid. I was agitated and appalled, but not afraid. My spiritual practice was working, and fear had not stood in the way of my solving an immediate and urgent problem whose potential consequences could have been, in my house at least, serious.

As with any spiritual practice, the practice of resisting fear requires our conviction and attention. We have to decide first of all that the absence of fear will enhance our well-being, just as meditation or yoga will enhance our well-being. Then we have to watch—pay attention to all the daily efforts we are exposed to whose purpose is to make us anxious, overly cautious, or afraid. Then we have to examine legitimate sources for our fear, and ask ourselves if fear helps or hinders us in our efforts to deal with those situations. Am I going to be any healthier because I am afraid of a particular treatment? Is my child going to be any safer because I am afraid of the dumb choices my child might make? Is my retirement going to be any more secure because I am afraid right now about my future finances? This is not to say that we should avoid thinking about such situations; rather, we don't allow fear to determine how we deal with them. We name what we fear; we just don't let fear have any decision-making power. Once being mindful of our fear becomes a habit, it's not difficult to begin to intentionally put it down, decide to stop carrying the weight of something we do not need.

We all fear, naturally, that terrible things are going to happen to us, and at some point in each of our lives, terrible things are going to happen to us. Fear does not protect us from those things. What fear does do is block us from experiencing the wonder of the present moment, which is one of a finite number of moments available to us. May we realize the potential to feel joy, awe, excitement, contentment, appreciation in any given present moment, without allowing fear to rob us of that grace. And so may it be.