

Learning to Fly, Learning to Fall: On Fear and Courage
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During my years in Pittsburgh, I was a frequent flyer, back and forth to Boston mostly, to teach. On one return trip to Pittsburgh, my seatmate in a snug, two-seat row was a young woman, perhaps 17 or 18, with chipped purple nail polish at the tips of white-knuckled hands, grasping the arm rest between us as if her very life depended on it. When I began to adjust my seatbelt, I caught her eye as she looked about anxiously. I smiled reassuringly.

The smile was her cue to begin talking to me, monologue-style, at breakneck speed as if we had just paused briefly to hear the flight attendant's spiel about exit rows.

While we taxied, I got a mini tutorial on this girl (named Lyndsey it turns out), punctuated with breathless admissions of her fear of flying, and I did my best to distract and calm her in preparation for takeoff.

I was remembering a tale by my colleague, the Rev. Gary Smith, so I paraphrased it for her. Gary recalls a flight back in February of 1998 – as he tells it - “into the teeth of *El Nino*, wind and rain, on his way to Santa Barbara, transferring at LAX to a fifteen-passenger commuter plane for the short flight north.

“We taxi out onto the runway,” he tells us. “The rain is pouring down, the wind is blowing, and even darker clouds are on the horizon. As the plane takes off it begins to rock from side to side and the engine noises grow louder.”

I become aware of my fellow passengers,” writes Smith, “mostly business-suited adults, but also a family of five: mother, father, sister, brother, sister. It is the youngest child, a sweet two-year-old blond girl, belted into her own seat in a row of one, who begins to softly sing in the midst of these engine noises and this rain and this wind, sing in the midst of this experience of once again defying the law we can Gravity.”

“Woe, woe, woe your boat, genty down the stweam,” she sings, mewwily, mewwily, mewwily, mewwily, life is but a dweam.” And she continues to sing this same song, over and over, sings it without self-consciousness, and sings it not for our entertainment or to show off, but just to sing.”

“And as she sings it and sings it, can you believe we begin to sing it with her, first one of us and then another, softly at first this silly and wonderful song we have known since childhood, until we are all singing, and we have landed in Santa Barbara, and we are safe, and another angel has entered our lives.”

My story distracted Lyndsey enough to keep it together as we gained altitude. Lyndsey was learning to fly, and she was learning to fall, too - to be with her fear, with as much courage and as much grace as possible.

As you absorb Gary Smith's tale of turbulence and tenderness, ask yourself: Are you more like the white-knuckled flyers or the carefree, grace-filled angel of a girl? Would you have sung along with her, even in your abject fear?

It is another blue sky, sunny summer day here in Flagstaff, and we are here on terra firma, reflecting together about fear and about grace, about learning to fly and learning to fall, and Gary's wonderful story leads the way.

I reckon that in Christian churches, my colleagues might also be livestreaming sermons today about fear and about the concept of grace and the embodiment of it in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Did she say "Grace?" OK. So, what does Grace have to do with *us* – Unitarian Universalists who have mostly eschewed the classic theological constructs of our Christian past? What healing, what hope, what benefit does the complex notion of grace hold forth for us?

An answer, simply put - - and my sermon in a nutshell – and I am taking liberties with symbols here - Our *fear* nails us to a symbolic cross in our lives, while *grace*, the sacred universal force that is available all around us and sufficient within us, frees us to be resurrected into ourselves.

It liberates us to rest in what is *real*, even when that reality is turbulent, unpleasant, unexpected, unwanted. As the bumper sticker proclaims: "Grace happens." And it can even happen to us skeptical, liberal types.

When we read the Gospel stories about Jesus on the cross, we cannot help but notice his fear. He is a wholly human man, subjected to an excruciating tortuous death he doesn't deserve. He cries out in his anguish and pain: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At the moment of death, we are told in Mark: "Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last." He gave a loud cry. He didn't go quietly. His fear is palpable.

Theologians have often argued that there can be no resurrection without crucifixion. On a metaphorical level, I suppose they're right. There is little realistic chance, in our imperfect human lives on this imperfect planet, of avoiding sorrow, loss, pain, setbacks, and ultimately, passing into the mystery. How can we disagree with this as we live through an unnerving pandemic?

Likewise, unless you've achieved enlightenment and detachment from suffering (and if you've made it that far, please come see me so I can sign on as your student!), then you've had encounters with fear. You have been afraid, deeply afraid.

Perhaps, you've feared that you are unlovable or unworthy; or that you cannot control outcomes; or that a loved one will disappear or perish from COVID-

19 or some other misfortune; or that you may lose your job. You may fear that you are not a good enough person, or parent, or partner, or friend.

Your relationships may follow a script, dictated by your toxic inner chatterbox and written in the handwriting of your fears. You may dread being alone or what will become of you in your old age. You may fear your grief. You may fear death. You may fear life.

Especially in a society beset by racism, instability, and rising authoritarianism, you may fret that the world is such an inherently unsafe place that fear is the only *modus operandi* that fits.

You may believe, a bit irrationally, that fear will protect you like a shield. In the wake of societal and personal traumas, even as we eventually return to relative normalcy in our daily lives, psychologists note a continuing roller coaster of emotions, from sheer horror to grief to anger, to uncertainty. The laundry list of worries ranges from fear of flying to nervousness about neighbors, plagues, and attending an large gathering.

In response, psychologist Frank Farley warns us that “a nation that is terrified of uncertainty is in big trouble. We can’t be terrified.” He goes on to advise us take action to combat our fears. Get involved in the community, he suggests. Or, go to a concert. Exercise.

And, although, I don’t dispute any of Farley’s ideas, I’m more inclined to agree with the renowned Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, who counsels us to become *intimate* with our fears, rather than endeavor to pound them into some sort of submission.

Pema explains that “fear is a natural reaction to moving closer to the truth. Of course, the last thing we want is a further introduction to the boogeyman. Mostly, we want to get rid of our fears, but Buddha nature, cleverly disguised as fear, kicks our butt into being receptive.”

“So, the next time you encounter fear,” Pema advises, “consider yourself lucky. This is where the courage comes in. usually, we think of brave people as having no fear. The truth is that they are intimate with fear.”

“This intimacy and this courage,” Pema continues, “serve us well when things fall apart and we let ourselves be nailed to the present moment.” Her teachings remind me of a bumper sticker I saw recently that presented the word FEAR as an acronym for “Future events already ruined.”

Ultimately, the decision to become intimate with your fear is one you will need to make on your own. No one can make it for you. The decision is yours as to whether to take yourself down from the cross of your fears and nail yourself to the present moment; to remove the hair shirt of your anger, denial, or procrastination; and to allow yourself to take the calculated risks that are part of the process of learning to fly.

There are many, many role models for facing uncertainty and tragedy with honesty and courage. One such person is Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali writer and poet from Calcutta, India, who penned our opening words (Fearful Joy).

The Rev. Frederick-Gray, our UUA President, reminds us that “His verses speaks of love, prayer, hope and the challenge of universal care and concern for all people. His poetry is often a celebration of life, a call to joy, and reminder to serve, a call to love more compassionately and deeply.”

“Yet, in his life he knew more loss, more tragedy than many. His mother died when he was only thirteen years old. He lost his wife when she was only 30. Soon after, his daughter died, then his father, then his youngest son. Before the death of his children, he lost his beloved sister-in-law, who took her own life.

Tagore himself, years later, suffered a period of such depression that he considered suicide. He knew the real hardship, the tragedy of life, personally, and also socially as he grieved for the number of poor people growing in the city of Calcutta and also as he saw his own people’s dignity denied under British rule.”

“His poems were a reminder of hope, a reminder of love, and sometimes just a reminder to celebrate life despite the risk and abundance of tragedy.

Risk is a scary concept, though, because risk, by definition, involves exposing yourself to hazard, loss, or injury. Risk is therefore usually internalized as something to avoid. Most companies try to minimize risk in business activity to remain successful; many people avoid high-risk physical activities to reduce bodily harm; and more often than not people follow the rules to limit the risk of getting in trouble. Yet it also seems that people fear taking risks because they fear failure.

Yet, avoiding all risks isn't particularly helpful in the real world. Of course, we want to wear masks and take other safety measures to avoid the real risk of COVID-19. But what about less deadly risks in how you approach life? There's only one way to find out – feel the fear and do it anyway. You may fly, you may fall...probably both ...you will learn. You may be a disaster, a “falling star” as it were, or you may find yourself “resting in the grace of the world,” in the words of writer Wendell Berry.

What might it mean to rest in the grace of this world, with all of its beauty and all of its ugliness? Grace exists as a force that “meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.” (Annie Lamott) Yet, there’s a catch. When we accept this gift by resting in the grace of the world we must, in turn, accept what is *real* in our lives as *real*...good or bad, painful or joyful, desired or thrust upon us, moment by moment.

We drop the illusion that we can control everything that happens to us in a random Universe, or that only good things will occur in our lives because we are essentially good people. We recognize and honor an inner grace that taps the

inherent divinity that might heal us, heal the planet, and heal our relationships with others.

In fact, more often than not, grace occurs through a willingness to drop our self-pity or self-righteousness, or the façade of courage, and be vulnerable to falling. It is then that we allow some wind to get under our wings. As Victoria Safford tells us, recalling an old Ojibwa song, “Sometimes I go about in pity of myself, and all the while, the wind is bearing me across the sky.”

What wind might get under your wings and bear you across the sky? I’ll tell you that as my flight instructor I’ll take a human Jesus or Buddha or average Joe, for that matter, who has known fear and who has embraced grace. I’ll take a world where both exist, and I encourage you to do that same, because we really have no choice in the matter.

Children (like the girl on the airplane) may reside, more naturally and blessedly so, in states of natural grace. But, we adults know that life is not a dream, or an endless stream for rowing merrily.

When despair for the world grows in us, like it did in my seatmate Lyndsey, when we wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what life may be, let us wrestle honestly with these fears. Let us love ourselves through the turbulence of wind and rain. Let us discover our power as we learn to fly as we learn to fall.

The fearful and fearless Pema Chodron gives us yet another story to lead us from fear to grace and back to our daily rounds: Pema writes:

“One of my favorite stories about Jarvis Masters [a prison inmate currently sentenced to death row, who took vows as a Buddhist from behind bars] was when he unintentionally helped some other inmates connect with the absolute, vast quality and openness of their own minds.

There is a teaching that says that behind all hardening and tightening and rigidity of the heart, there’s always fear. But if you touch fear, behind fear there is a soft spot. And if you touch that soft spot, you find the vast blue sky.

One day there was a seagull out on the yard in San Quentin. It had been raining and the seagull was there paddling around in a puddle. One of the inmates picked up something in the yard and was about to throw it at the bird. Jarvis didn’t even think about it—he automatically put out his hand to stop the man.

Of course this escalated the man’s aggression and he started yelling. Who the hell did Jarvis think he was? And why did Jarvis care so much about some blankety-blank bird?

Everyone started circling around, just waiting for the fight. The other inmate was screaming at Jarvis, “Why’d you do that?” And out of Jarvis’s mouth came the words, “I did that because that bird’s got my wings.”

Everyone got it. It simply stopped their minds, softened their hearts, and then there was silence.”

Blessed be. Blessed we. Amen

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