



Chapter One

Understanding Fear

Fear is a reminder that we are creatures—fragile, vulnerable, totally dependent on God. But fear shouldn't dominate or control or define us. Rather, it should submit to faith and love.

—PHILIP BERRIGAN

MYSTICS, POETS, AND LOVERS tell us that the heart has its reasons, which the mind does not know. They name the heart the center of emotion, the symbol for love and hate, grief and rage, tranquility and fear. So we speak of being heartbroken, of having a heavy or peaceful heart. So much that truly matters happens at this deep level: the warmth that delights us in a freshly discovered love, the anguish that envelops us when a marriage falls apart, the anxiety that gnaws when a friend falls ill. But sometimes we cannot tell whether we are angry, sad, or anxious, so we fix something to eat, have a drink, or busy ourselves by surfing the Web. Emotions nevertheless play themselves out in body and mind, relationships and families, work and politics. Knowing what to make of emotions, and what to do with them, determines not only health and happiness but

holiness as well. Much of what happens in the spiritual life depends on directing their energy wisely.

This applies especially to feelings of fear, a primary emotion that alerts us to matters of life and death. A mother sees her toddler about to fall from a playground slide and catches him just in time. A couple out for an evening walk jump out of the path of a careening car. Fear's sudden surge



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of insight and energy fuels these reactions.

It protects lives. But anxiety can also disrupt our sleep, render our bodies rigid, and prevent us from flying or attending a social event. Fear helps or hinders in countless ways.

The fact that we experience fear both as aid and ordeal, as friend

and foe, raises several questions. Should we calm our fears, or ramp them up? How does fear fit into a healthy spirituality? The answers rest on recognizing the great diversity that marks the human experience of fear. Like love, it comes in many shapes and sizes. A rich array of terms describes its many manifestations: *anxiety, terror, dread, panic, alarm, worry, awe, reverence*. We fear not only physical consequences of injury but also mental sinkholes and quagmires. We can imagine and try to avoid emotional as well as bodily pain. On this psychic level, fear branches out to embrace a

spectrum of experiences: failure, betrayal, embarrassment, disability, disapproval. Religion extends fear from this life to the next, with images of punishment and hell to enforce conformity.

Sorting through the expressions of fear lays the groundwork for deciding which to heed and which to heal. It also prepares us to see the essential role spiritual resources play in facing as well as assuaging fears. Let us begin by reflecting on fear as gift, and then move to those problematic forms that immobilize and limit us. Finally, let us consider a crucial element of any healthy spiritual life: what it means to fear God.

Fear as Gift

When a huge tsunami devastated the coastline around the Indian Ocean the day after Christmas 2004, observers noticed a striking phenomenon. Almost no bodies of animals were found among those of the thousands of people killed by the giant walls of water. In Khao Lak, Thailand, elephants started trumpeting hours before the tsunami. They began wailing an hour beforehand, and just before it struck they fled to higher ground—some breaking their chains to do so. Similar animal behavior was reported in India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. Alert to the vibrating ground, to the sound and scent of the sea, and to the behavior of other animals, they sensed imminent danger and made their way to higher ground. Many humans, on the other hand, missed the signs or failed to grasp their implications. Some brought their children to the beach to watch the unusual behavior of the ocean.

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The word *fear* initially evokes only painful associations, like those now linked to the tsunami. We seldom list fear among the things for which we are grateful. But as the tsunami disaster makes clear, fear arrives as blessing as well as burden. Animals (from fruit flies to monkeys) know fear. It tells them to flee or find shelter. So also with human beings. Designed as a natural warning system, fear helps us recognize and respond to anticipated peril. In fact, the word itself derives from an Old English term for danger. It calls us to protect life, our own and that of others, and then to extend this protection outward to all creation.

The opening chapters of the biblical book of Genesis, in which we watch Adam and Eve being ejected from the Garden of Eden, contain an early account of human fear. Adam replies to God's voice, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid." By that point in the story, trusting relationships at every level have been fractured. In a world without sin and suffering, fear would presumably have no function. Life could thrive without the need to brace itself against possible threats. But the Book of Genesis depicts not only paradise unspoiled but also our current universe, Eden lost and not yet restored. Ours is a creation of lost innocence, riddled with danger, distrust, enmity, natural disasters, and therefore fear. Genesis is not the last time fear occurs in scripture; the Bible talks a lot about fear, telling us what to fear and what not to. Like the posters I recently saw on a Seattle bus, it reminds us both to "Look around. Be aware," and "Relax. Help is just a click away."

The immediacy and detail of worldwide communication today situates fear for our personal future within a

broader horizon of global perils. We wonder about health, our own and our children's; we dread the consequences of environmental destruction, war and violence, epidemics, and biological and chemical terrorism. No conscious person could, or should, be entirely without fear in the face of such universal dangers. Like the flares at the site of a freeway accident, such warnings prompt us to prudence. In the past, fear has fueled many creative inventions that now enable us to avoid dangers. It will again prove to be a blessing if it leads us to change course and protect our planet's future.

Accepting Fear Rather Than Fighting It

A friend who has anxiously waited days for a doctor's decision about her breast biopsy finally learns there is nothing the matter with her. "I hope I never have to go through this again," she says as she comes out of the doctor's office. We know something of what she feels as she waits. Like her, we want to avoid feeling that way again if at all possible. It therefore puzzles us to learn that psychologists, Buddhist teachers, and other spiritual guides offer a similar recommendation regarding fear. The best way to deal with it, they say, is to allow it to simply be what it is. They use the terms *radical acceptance* or *befriending* for this nonjudgmental embrace of the body's reaction to danger. Psychologists term the ability to feel an emotion *affect tolerance*.

As with any of the emotions, denial complicates matters, dulling awareness in the same way a cataract clouds the pupil of the eye. Fear then often expresses itself as anger, a more socially acceptable emotion (especially for

men). But if we convert the energy of fear to anger, we are likely to act out in destructive ways. As with experiences of referred pain, we do not realize the place that hurts is not the source of the trouble. The source lies somewhere else. Learning to face our fears with confidence that we can handle them creates a more direct and healthier path to what we want. With acceptance, there is room to recognize the information an emotion contains and then decide what we want to do about it. Listening to feelings in this way is the starting point for wise choices.

This implies that we need not be ashamed of being afraid. An Episcopal priest once told me about a retreat she



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made with other pastors. They were asked to step into a circle marked at various points with emotions such as anger, sadness, joy, and fear, and to stand wherever they most identified with a feeling. Almost none of them could acknowledge being afraid; it was too hard to ask for help and

protection. Shame and embarrassment suggest that there is something wrong with us if we get scared. But Jesus himself knew fear, both in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he asked his disciples to stay with him, and earlier as he adhered to his own time frame for the final approach to Jerusalem, knowing his enemies awaited him there. The

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gospels even describe the bodily manifestations of his terror in the Garden, how he began to be “distressed and agitated” and told his disciples, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake” (Mark 14:33–34). Seeing Jesus’ fear is one of the ways we know he is human, and it confirms the fact that deep and powerful emotions do not signify weakness but rather reveal the full range of the human response to life’s events.

Some past forms of spirituality fed this shame by valuing mind over body, and reason over emotion. They linked feelings such as anger and fear to weakness and also to fuzzy thinking. Today we realize that body and mind are closely intertwined, designed like an intricate piece of embroidery. Neuroscience is dissolving some of the mystery around our emotional life, and its breakthroughs enable us to understand fear perhaps better than any other emotion. Science tells us that feelings do not exist in opposition to reason; in fact, we cannot think well or make decisions without their help.

The Tibetan meditation teacher Pema Chödrön emphasizes that by acknowledging an emotion and allowing ourselves to feel the energy of the moment, we cultivate compassion for ourselves. This frees us to experience what scares us in a new way. I discovered the truth of her insight while healing from a fear of dogs that stemmed from a childhood incident. When I was ten, my sister and I were sent to a neighbor’s house to pick up our weekly supply of eggs. What we did not know was that the neighbor was away and her dog was about to give birth to puppies. Instead of the welcome we usually received, we found an agitated and

defensive dog that badly bit my little sister before I could stop it. I half-carried my sister home, and she had to be taken to the hospital.

Feeling responsible for what had happened and shaken by the upheaval it created, I developed a distrust of dogs I had never known before. A first step in facing this fear was letting go of the judgments I leveled against myself for feeling scared, as well as for the incident that led to it in the first place. Then I needed to gradually be around dogs. Sitting alone and avoiding them only increased my discomfort and solidified my bad memories. Over the years, learning more about their wonderful qualities from those who love dogs, being with them on walking paths and in the homes of friends, and finding that they come with varied personalities has helped me move through this fear. Without knowing my history, my clients themselves contributed to this healing as they brought their dogs in to meet me, shared their deep affection for them, or came to me in grief over the loss of a beloved pet.

Whether we call it radical acceptance or befriending, allowing ourselves to feel and face our fears takes courage. It does not happen easily. In fact, it requires grace. The Psalms repeatedly express trust that God will be with us in handling fear and moving beyond danger.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.*

—PSALM 121:1–2

Many of the spiritual practices suggested in later chapters lend support for this way of embracing fear and finding the courage we need.

When Fear Becomes a Problem

If fear is so valuable, why do we try to weed it out of our lives? Prolonged or misplaced fear shrinks the human capacity for joy, creativity, and freedom, making it impossible to fully realize the happiness God intends for us. Letting fear become a way of life also has negative physiological consequences. Fear sets in motion a sequence of bodily responses meant to help us escape danger. We cannot escape such responses altogether, and they sometimes serve a purpose. But if repeated or prolonged, they have serious consequences for health. As the brain centers that are crucial to fear keep registering potential danger, they set in motion a process that increases the body's stress hormones, which among other things makes the heart pump faster, quickens breathing, and reduces the ability to concentrate. This is helpful in an emergency, but if the body remains on this kind of alert, the stress takes a toll. It weakens the immune system and raises the risk of cardiovascular disease. The muscle tension created by anxiety produces headaches, insomnia, and back and neck pain. What was meant to be a life-saving resource now becomes itself a threat.

There are also more extreme forms of fear, conditions where fear has become pathological. Brain chemistry, genetic inheritance, childhood experiences, traumatic events, and current stress might all be causal factors. Think

of these afflictions as the higher end of the fear spectrum, false alarms that cannot be turned off. They include severe trauma, panic attacks, and phobias. *Posttraumatic stress syndrome* is the term usually used for the psychological and physical difficulties that result from extreme trauma and stress, such as witnessing death or serious injury during war, or being sexually assaulted. The event is then relived in dreams, flashbacks, and other intrusive symptoms. A *panic attack* is a sudden bout of intense fear, marked physically by rapid heartbeat and shortness of breath. A *phobia* refers to a specific fear, which may be of almost anything—heights, flying, strangers, public spaces, or closed spaces such as an elevator. Many people feel some mild fear of these things but continue to function normally. Severe phobias, however, can be incapacitating.

Dealing with serious forms of trauma, panic, phobia, or anxiety usually requires professional help, and sometimes medication. For many people, these kinds of fear involve great suffering and constitute a dark night of the soul. The good news is that there are many treatments available. Here too the spiritual dimension forms an important part of the healing process, as it strengthens and informs other approaches.

Most of us struggle with lesser forms of fear. Anxiety and worry gnaw at the edges of awareness, like a caterpillar munching away at leaves. In fact, ours has been called a culture of anxiety. Whereas fear is a limited emotion with a definite object, anxiety is an unfocused fear that reaches into all of life. Since human beings have the capacity not only to react to threats but to anticipate them as well, anxi-

ety turns to what might happen in the future. Worry is the internal process of trying to figure out a way to escape from this potential threat. Worry often travels around with us, like a pebble in a shoe.

Anxiety is a painful and life-altering experience for those who endure it to any great degree. However, short of a serious anxiety disorder, we

can often lessen it ourselves. Spiritual resources such as prayer and meditation offer powerful ways to better understand and reduce the impact of what frightens us. But fundamental to this weaving of spirituality into our experiences of fear is making sure that our spiritual

beliefs themselves are not compounding the problem. This means, among other things, looking at how we understand fear of God.



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Fear of the Lord as the Beginning of Wisdom

Many of us who grew up in an established religious tradition learned to fear God because of the ever-looming threat of hellfire and damnation. Such fear of God served as a disciplinary device in home, school, and church. It instilled in believers a dread of eternal punishment and made them uneasy about getting too close to God lest they be judged

and found wanting. But using fear as a primary religious motive, along with failing to produce healthy spiritual lives, intensified the difficulty many people already had with handling their other anxieties. Gradually spirituality has shifted to a greater emphasis on the love of God.

Although underscoring divine love helps offset the negative impact of a preoccupation with sin and guilt, it can also lessen the sense of wonder and mystery vital to spirituality. In its root meaning, *fear* connotes alarm and dread, but also reverence and awe. It signifies amazement before this immense and complex cosmos and the divine Mystery that creates and sustains it. The Bible, in fact, often uses the phrase “fear of the Lord” to describe a deep reverence for God. This awe-filled attentiveness keeps us attuned not only to God’s presence, but also to divine transcendence.

Scripture tells us that fear of the Lord comes as grace, a divine gift. When the prophet Isaiah promises that his defeated and demoralized people will have a new messianic leader, he declares that the spirit will rest on this person. It will be

*the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

—ISAIAH 11:2–3

Then, contradicting much of what we may have been taught about fear of God, Isaiah asserts that this spirit-conferred fear will be a delight. What can this possibly mean? It indicates that such fear does not preclude

love and intimacy, as human fear might. Rather, it is love that leads a person to hold God in awe. Joy and delight follow.

Further, the recognition of divine Wisdom that flows from reverence allows us to release the heavy burden of believing we have sole responsibility for, and control over, everything that happens in the universe.

Instead, trust in the divine Presence that upholds all creation puts our fears in perspective. This is why biblical figures are offered two

seemingly contradictory statements: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” and “Fear not, for I will be with you.” They are told what to fear and what not to fear. Trust in the mystery of God is fundamental to overcoming their fears.

Consider also the conversation Job has with God while trying to wrench some meaning from his immense suffering. After Job has fully laid out his bitterness and despair, God speaks to him in stanza after stanza of astonishingly beautiful poetry. God offers Job an extended hymn to the universe, a sweeping vision of Creation. Verse upon verse name the wonders of the universe: teeming seas and shifting rhythms of light and darkness, drops of dew and wildly flapping ostrich wings, soaring hawks and horses leaping like locusts. God asks Job,



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*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the
earth?*

Tell me, if you have understanding.

...

*On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

...

*What is the way to the place
where the light is distributed,
or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?*

—JOB 38:4, 6–7, 24

Job's lesson in awe does not preclude a close personal relationship with God. Even as he acknowledges wonders he cannot fully grasp, Job experiences God's presence as the only real answer to his agonized questions about evil: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (42:5). The Book of Job ends by affirming worship and intimacy as moments in the spiritual life, linked by an accurate understanding of fear of God.

Fear of the Lord, then, should produce not human cowering but true security, for it witnesses to a Wisdom beyond what we can immediately discern. As a central teaching of both the Bible and the Quran, this fear is not a debilitating anxiety; rather, it is a deep reverence for God that brings openness to divine guidance. When developed to its fullest extent, the fear of the Lord becomes the ideal

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attitude of a human being before the Creator, almost synonymous with faith itself. One translation of the Quran renders “fear of the Lord” as “God-consciousness.” A person who “fears the Lord” in this fullest sense remains ever aware of the divine purpose in the universe. Fulfilling God’s desire then increasingly directs one’s life.

Fear’s many cadences culminate in this reverence and wonder before the Mystery that sustains us. We have seen how varied fear’s manifestations can be, from clear and appropriate fear that helps us avoid danger to nameless anxiety that plagues our days, and to troubling phobias that seriously constrict us. Understanding the purpose of fear and the shapes it takes helps us determine what to fear and what not to fear—the topic we turn to next.

