

# Fear as a prelude to courage

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*Spirit of Life*

I probably don't have to tell you that many people are afraid right now. As a minister, it's not unusual for people to share with me that they are feeling fear. What is currently unusual is the sheer volume, both in the number of people and in the size of the fears they describe. And let me be completely transparent: In the mix of feelings I personally cycle through daily, fear is definitely there.

The presence of fear, however, is not the problem. Fear, like all emotions, can be a critical messenger about what we need for survival. Note: the most important word in the previous sentence is "we." You see, one of fear's tactics is to make us feel alone, as if we can rely on no one or nothing but ourselves. When we begin to think only of ourselves, and survival becomes something we think of as being "in limited supply" (i.e.

only available to me if someone else doesn't get it), then we have already lost the plot.

This morning on my drive to work, I heard the news that over 400 people were killed by Israeli airstrikes in Gaza overnight. At the

same moment, I noticed two children walking together to school. I assumed they were siblings when the younger leaned gently into the taller for support and then grabbed their hand for the rest of the journey. I began to cry, so moved I was by this simple act of tenderness. It reminded me of my favorite Naomi Shihab Nye poem, "Shoulders," which describes a man gently carrying his sleeping son across the street to protect him from rain, cars and other unimaginable accidents. The poet concludes, "We're not going to be able to live in this world unless we are willing to do what he is doing with one another."

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Are we alarmed by this most recent revelation of the fragility of peace in our world? Do we feel fear when we witness our neighbors detained without cause? Is it scary to watch the poor and marginalized even further

disenfranchised from public programs they rely on to live? Is it terrifying to observe the attack on DEI go so far that "trans" is removed from the national Stonewall memorial, and the contributions of Indigenous, black, LGBTQ+ and women are being scrubbed from veteran historical records on government websites? Of course it is! It's likely that those who aren't afraid on some level either aren't paying attention or the impact of current executive actions haven't yet become personal. Yet!

Here's the thing about fear: Fear can be a prelude to courage. In fact, it could be argued that one cannot be courageous until one is afraid.

My favorite definition of courage, attributed to Dorothy Bernard, is that "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." The word courage has etymological roots in the Latin "cor," for "heart." Heartless brutality represents neither strength nor courage, though it requires courage to respond to cruelty with kindness and to heartlessness with compassion. Courage requires us to keep our hearts open and pliable, even though we are afraid, and refuse to accept the inevitability of injustice.

If you're feeling fear right now, you are not alone. The presence of fear indicates the conditions for courage are optimal. Let's take a deep breath, remember who we are and what we value, reach out for one another, and keep moving forward. We're in this together.

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