

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
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## **Facing Down Fear**

“When asked why they’re supporting Donald Trump, his fans often say, ‘Because he’ll make us safe.’”<sup>1</sup>

Why are we so afraid? Why are we so enamored of the illusion of security?

Evolution wired our brains to respond to perceived threats with adrenaline pouring into our system, hearts racing, fists clenched. Lawlessness; anti-Islamic bigotry; unbridled racism, especially among those who are supposed to be upholding the law; terrorism: these are all terrifying. But to live in a state of high alert makes us neurotic and paranoid. We lose all perspective. We become unhinged.<sup>2</sup>

Countless people faced down fear, risked their lives, and lost their lives in the service of a vision of a country – these United States – that proffers freedom and happiness for all people. How disrespectful of our forbears’ courage, how unbecoming, to be defined by what we fear.

This morning, I invite you to a reflection on the spiritual practice of facing down fear.

Alix Spiegel and Lulu Miller host a National Public Radio program called *Invisibilia*: “stories about the invisible forces that shape human behavior.” A year ago, they did a show featuring a scientist named Roger Hart, who, in the 1970s, “realized that we knew more about baboons’ everyday behavior than we did about human children’s behavior outside of school.” He went to live in a small town in Vermont, and began tracking all the children there – eighty-six kids between the ages of three and twelve. He

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<sup>1</sup> William Falk, “Editor’s Letter,” *The Week*, 12/25/15, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Falk, *op cit*

spent two and a half years working with them every waking hour, studying them the way Jane Goodall studied baboons. He asked them, “Show me the places that are dangerous.... the places that are scary. Take me to where you’re not supposed to go....”

From that information, Roger Hart created “maps that measured the distance each child was allowed to go by themselves, and what the average was” for the different age groups. He discovered a through-line of remarkable freedom; even four- and five-year-olds traveled unsupervised throughout their neighborhoods and the woods that surrounded them. By the time they were ten years old, the kids had the run of the town. They would even go to the lake, a place we can well imagine would be out of bounds, but their parents weren’t worried about it. They weren’t motivated by fear. There was no stranger danger. There was no terror of abduction.

Thirty-six years later, Roger Hart returned to the town to study the children of those children. But when he asked that new generation of kids to show him where they played unsupervised, they didn’t go very far: they just walked him around their yards. That huge circle of their parents’ freedom on the maps he had made was reduced to dots.

Today, the town is the virtually the same physically, the same demographically. But the parents are terrified. And even though the new generation of kids is much older now, their parents – those former free-range kids – say, “I need to know where you are at all times.” Andrew Cole, who, at four years old, had been filmed by Roger Hart playing with a five-year-old friend alone in the woods, is now the parent of three girls. He says he is afraid to let his kids roam free. “I think when we were children, ... my parents wouldn’t worry if I [were] gone for an hour, ... or up in the woods. But here, if my girls are gone for five minutes, I start to ... think, Okay, somebody could be turning around at the end of the road, and ... you know, whatever.”

Crime is at its lowest level nationally since the 1950s, but everywhere, fear shrinks our circle of freedom. Ralph Adolphs, a professor at Caltech who spent decades studying fear in the human brain, concluded that we’re living in an environment different from the environment in which we evolved, and modern life is “constantly triggering our fear in all kinds of ways ... [the] natural world [doesn’t].”

Because of the media, for example, all of us have probably heard the sound of gunfire, but relatively few of us have been in proximity to human beings firing guns at each other. In our everyday lives, our limbic system doesn't sort out what is actually threatening, and what is merely our imagination firing our amygdala.

As if that weren't bad enough, it turns out that we respond to fearful people around us by becoming afraid. Dr. Lilianne Mujica-Parodi, a neuroscientist at Stony Brook University in New York, collected the sweat of very terrified people; they were skydiving for first time. She then wafted it into the noses of unsuspecting, perfectly calm people lying down in fMRIs,<sup>3</sup> and watched as the fear center of their brains lit up. In other words, we respond to disembodied fear. Fear is literally in the air.

And right there is where our giant minds come in to face down fear.

Greg Downey is a scientist at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. His research on fear shows that we actually have to "turn it on" ... meaning we can also turn it off.

"We can change our level of fear," he says. "... That's ... one of the things that makes humans so different from other animals. The first human who picked up a spear and actually didn't run away panicked when dinner came calling was overriding fear. [It's] amazing that [our ancestors] did that. I don't know if there [are] any ... other species ... who've moved from being prey to predator."

And how do we do it? How do we face down fear? Greg Downey says it all comes down to a special human gift: "the fact that you can talk to yourself in your own head.... If your body's telling you to flee, you can use that little executive in your head [- executive function -] to ignore it." It's incredibly powerful.

One of the things that sets our bodies awash in adrenaline is being confronted with something we don't understand. And we can't entirely disappear fear; we're way too "animal" for that. Fear is our genetic destiny.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Wikipedia, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) "is a functional neuroimaging procedure using MRI technology that measures brain activity by detecting changes associated with blood flow. This technique relies on the fact that cerebral blood flow and neuronal activation are coupled."

But our evolution depended on our ancestors not being afraid of things that were perfectly reasonable to fear. We can face down fear with knowledge – with the facts that lead to understanding. Greg Downey has proven that when we can narrow down the precise source of our fear and engage the rational mind, fear can be drastically reduced.<sup>4</sup>

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After his wife left him, an IT specialist in Ontario, Canada named Jason Comely found himself becoming more and more anti-social and isolated. Jason explains it, “Yeah, I was extremely self-conscious, ... just completely weird around people and ... almost out-of-body.” Just trying to talk to someone, he would get what he describes as an “icy cold feeling,” and think, “I have to get air.”

One especially bleak night, he finally realized that what he was feeling was fear. But why? He had never been a fearful person. And then he named it: he had become terrified of rejection.

Jason Comely’s response to this profound insight was extraordinary. He decided that what he needed to do was to set himself up to be rejected at least once a day. He named this practice “rejection therapy.”

It started in the parking lot of a grocery store about twenty minutes from his home. He approached a total stranger and asked if he would give him a lift home. The man told him he wasn’t going that way. And bingo! Jason was rejected ... and survived. It was a completely liberating experience. He thanked the man – really thanked him. He had inverted the rules, making rejection something he really wanted and felt good about.

Next he took pamphlets from his church, went to a Wal-Mart, and tried to hand them out to people. He approached a very attractive woman who, he says, “looked me squarely in the eye, ... spoke very slowly and articulately, so that I would completely understand, ... [and said], No.”

Jason persevered, conjuring increasingly creative ways to be rejected:

- \* Ask a stranger for a piece of gum.
- \* Go the front of a long line and ask to cut in.

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<sup>4</sup> “World With No Fear,” on *Invisibilia*, National Public Radio, 1/15/15, Alix Spiegel and Lulu Miller, hosts. Please see [npr.org/2015/01/16/377517810/world-with-no-fear](http://npr.org/2015/01/16/377517810/world-with-no-fear)

\* Ask someone in the laundromat to do your laundry.

He actually created a deck of cards printed with suggested rejection attempts, and began to do a brisk business selling them online. But, he says, “It was harder to get rejected than I thought. And that was really amazing for me, that people were actually saying yes. I ... asked for a discount at a store, and [the guy behind the counter said,] ‘Well, yeah, okay. I’ll sell it to you for this.’ And I was like, ‘What? Really?’”

Jason Comely has not yet met his next wife, but he is living a life with a lot more social interaction and a lot less fear. And he’s concluded that fear comes mostly from the stories we tell ourselves. Disobey your fear – “feel the fear and do it anyway”<sup>5</sup> – and the world opens to you.<sup>6</sup>

In the end – in the beginning – facing down fear is best done in community. With people we love and trust, everything is so much less scary. I pray that we can practice facing down fear together, and imagine ways in which we can draw the circle of this beloved community wider and wider, like Roger Hart’s freedom maps, so that people with reasons to fear and fewer resources to address that fear may find sanctuary here. Jesus said, “Perfect love casts out fear.”<sup>7</sup>

Beloved spiritual companions,

May we refuse to be defined  
by what we fear.

May we engage our rational minds,  
and face down fear with knowledge.

*Perfect love casts out fear.*

When we feel the fear and do it anyway,  
the world opens to us.

Let us draw the circle of this beloved community  
wider and wider,  
and so make of this faith, our lives,  
a sanctuary.

*Amen.*

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<sup>5</sup> This is the title of Dr. Susan Jeffers’ iconic 1987 book

<sup>6</sup> “Disappearing Fear” on *Invisibilia*, National Public Radio, 1/15/15, Alix Spiegel and Lulu Miller, hosts. Please see [npr.org/2015/01/16377519199/disappearing-fear](http://npr.org/2015/01/16377519199/disappearing-fear)

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 4:18