

In Fear of Falling or Catching Fire
Arlington Street Church | July 17, 2016 | Rev. Joanna Lubkin

This is “Living Wide Open,” by Dawna Markova:

*I will not die an unlived life.
I will not live in fear
of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days,
to allow my living to open me,
to make me less afraid,
more accessible,
to loosen my heart
until it becomes a wing,
a torch, a promise.
I choose to risk my significance;
to live so that which came to me as seed
goes to the next as blossom
and that which came to me as blossom,
goes on as fruit.*

Thirty years ago, poet Dawna Markova was told she had six months to live.

She writes, “[Thirty] years of living with a life-threatening disease, cancer, brings me into daily conversations with my soul. I think cancer was my soul’s desperate attempt to get me to pay attention to its needs for intimacy, authentic expression, creativity, and replenishing solitude. I think of cancer as a teacher that was not invited, but has come to my house to visit from time to time nonetheless. It sits on my left side whispering insistent questions that I cannot answer but still must explore: ...What have I come here to give? What is unfinished for me to learn, to experience? Am I leaving a legacy that enables others to live bigger lives than I have?”

“These are questions that belong to all of us.” Life crises and reminders of mortality have a way of bringing up the issues of our life’s purpose and our passion to live.

Driving away from her mother's funeral, Dawna decided to have a conversation with Death. It whispered, "Do you want to die numb?"

"No!" She hissed back. 'I'd rather die soft and feeling pain than hard, brittle, and numb. I want to die with my heart free, wide open, wondering, and loving fiercely!"

The response was immediate: "Then how do you have to live so you can be sure to die that way?"

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What a blessing that we can, at any and every moment, choose to inhabit our days.

One of the people who teaches me how to do this is my mother, Leah. I could tell many stories of times she chose to live fully rather than be held back by fear, but here's the one I'll tell today.

My mother grew up in the 50s and 60s, hearing the message that women could be wives, beauticians, secretaries, or teachers. When my mom tells me this story, she likes to quote the Passover song, "*Dayeinu*," the refrain that "It would have been enough." Well, she didn't like working with hair and she wasn't smart enough, she thought, to be a teacher. She graduated high school as a nondescript "B" student in 1967. Her only marketable skills at that time came from a typing course, and what she had taught herself in animal behavior, dog training, and grooming. *Dayeinu*? It wasn't enough for her.

Over her family's objections, she found day jobs and went to night college for five years, finally obtaining an associate degree. She was the first woman in her family to attend college, although others followed. And, she was married. "Now, *dayeinu*?" she wondered. Still not enough for her.

¹ Markova, Dawna. *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life: Reclaiming Purpose and Passion*. Berkeley, CA: Conari, 2000.

I remember my mother working at a number of different jobs while I was growing up: she ran a daycare center, was a part-time dog-trainer, an amateur science fiction writer, and a self-taught paralegal. Throughout it all, people turned to her for support. But was she a teacher? Heck no. Teachers were smart. They had the answers. She was just sharing her knowledge.

When she was 52 years old, she started a job as a bookkeeper and secretary at an elementary school in Arkansas, where she lived. Within two weeks she was tutoring kids who were struggling to read, and within a year had established the first Reading Buddies program, where struggling kids would read to certified therapy dogs. Her supportive principal had noticed that she was bright, a wonderful writer, and great with children. She asked if my mother had ever considered becoming a teacher.

My mother responded with a resounding “No!” Not smart enough. Not enough time or money to earn the bachelor’s degree required to get a teaching license. She would be 55 when she finished the degree; 57 by the time she was licensed.

I asked her what her thought process was, and I have to read it to you verbatim. Her email response begins in all caps: OLD. IN DEBT. OLD. She was partially disabled and didn’t have the physical stamina to take on all that work. OLD. Who started a new career at age 57? Getting by on a daily basis was nearly more than she could handle, and adding responsibilities now? When she was OLD?

She’d have to be *meshuggah* to try it. Crazy! Crazy!

But the idea wouldn’t go away. Looking back through her working life, teaching had been at the heart of what she loved to do. She’d always been too afraid to go for it. Up ‘til now.

She began to investigate. Yes, she could take accredited college courses online. Yes, she qualified for school loans. (Oy! She says). She had to have bed rest after work for her disability, so she might as well try college courses instead of just playing on the internet.

And with luck, she'd turn first 55, then 57 anyway. She might as well have something to show for it.

She went back to school.

We graduated from college the same year.

She's been teaching English for ten years. When she teaches, she feels fully alive.

My mother will turn 67 years old this year. Is she done? Working in the classroom, she has seen that there is more for her to do, more that is hers to give. She has taken to championing public schools, has spoken to the state legislature, has sat on her walker holding up signs. She is still teaching as she approaches her newest challenge: leaving her comfort zone to move from Arkansas to Massachusetts, to essentially start over. I asked her if she was scared.

"No," she responded. "I'm not scared. I AM TERRIFIED! What if they withdraw social security? What if I can't supplement my income? What if I have to live out of my car?"

I sit quietly, and it's as if I can hear a voice say to her, "Hmmm. Maybe you should reconsider moving."

And then, her resolute response: "Are you kidding? No way! The moment I can locate an apartment I can afford, I'm on my way! All that scary stuff, if it's going to happen at all, is going to happen anyway. I might as well be living where I want to be. I'd rather go out like a supernova than implode into a black hole. We're all going to die at some point. Might as well keep on trying."

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When we're planning our summer services here at Arlington Street Church, speakers are asked to name our sermon topics far ahead of time so they can all be advertized. When I chose to focus on this poem, I was thinking of stories like my mom's. I was thinking of the question, "What would I do if I was not afraid?" and how one of the answers to that question was, "I would play guitar in public. It would be so liberating to be able to accompany myself and offer fuller music to the world. It terrifies me." So, having said that, I will not live in fear of falling or catching fire. Allowing my living to open me means that next week, I'll play guitar here during service. And now my commitment has been recorded on the podcast, so I have to do it.

I was thinking of these stories of self. But then, these past few weeks happened. Weeks both of violence and of a great swell of activism and commitment.

Alton Sterling was killed in Louisiana;
Philandro Castile was killed in Minnesota;
police officers were killed in Dallas at a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest.
A suicide bomber killed four people at Medina mosque housing
Muhammad's tomb, the second holiest site for Muslims.
Orlando. Nice.

Given this story of *us*, this story of *now*, how *do* we live fully in a world so in need of healing?

I look to one of my spiritual teachers, Maria Nemeth, for guidance. She reminds us that: "In these times, Monkey Mind — that inner voice of worry and doubt we all carry — often gets loud, with its own variations on a 'fear of falling or catching fire.' It may sound like:

'I'm only one person... how can I possibly make a difference?'

... 'What if I don't have what it takes?'

... 'What if I'm not doing enough?'

... 'What if it will never be enough?'

And so I want to offer you this now:

1) First, have compassion for yourself. Be present to your pain — whether it looks like anger, fear, sadness, or even numbness — and know that it all points to your great love for the world.

2) Acknowledge your longing to contribute. How do you yearn to create healing and transformation in the world around you? This is your greatness... and your gift to give.

3) Demonstrate ‘compassion in action’ — not ‘thoughts and prayers’ without deeds, nor action without heart. What small step are you willing to take, from the vision of the world you want to see?

Writer and activist Adrienne Maree Brown recently said: “Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight & continue to pull back the veil.”²

My dear ones: Everywhere, there is a need for healing, resilience, dignity, and honor. The world needs you fully alive.

So I ask you, my spiritual companions:

What have you come here to give?

What is unfinished for you to learn, to experience?

What would you do if you were not afraid?

Seeing that, what small, sweet step are you willing to take?

Let us hold each other tightly, look with clear eyes, and make our lives a blessing to all.

So may it be. Amen.

² Thanks to the Academy for Coaching Excellence for mass-emailing this message from Maria Nemeth on July 13, 2016.