

“The Things We Do for Fear” * 17 February, 2008
Rev. Erika Hewitt * Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation

“Intelligence is like 4 -wheel drive: it just enables you to get stuck in more remote places.” ~ Garrison Keillor

“Yeah...fear does that too.” ~ Erika Hewitt

Message for All Ages

This is a story about the great Hasidic master Rabbi Zusya.¹

When Rabbi Zusya grew old and knew that his time on earth was nearing a close, his students were called around him. One of them spoke up timidly, asking Rabbi Zusya what he was most afraid of about dying.

“I’m most afraid of what they will ask me when I get to heaven,” he said.

“What will they ask you in heaven?” the disciples were eager to know.

“They will not ask me, ‘Zusya, why were you not like Moses?’” he said, “nor will they ask ‘Zusya, why were you not like Abraham?’ They will ask me, ‘Zusya, why were you not Zusya?’”

** What do you think Zusya meant?*

** If you were Zusya, how would you answer that question?*

** As you go about your week, notice when you’re expressing what feels true for you and when you aren’t. Imagine what you would do and how your life would be if you were “totally you” – not the perfect you, but the you if your inner you were totally expressed.*

Sermon: “The Things We Do for Fear”

I hope that you all had a nice Valentine’s Day, and that you felt loved by someone, somewhere in the world. Predictably, I received a phone call from a Goleta couple asking whether I would officiate at their wedding. It’s one of the delights of being a minister: meeting couples glowing with new love and ready to tie the knot. It’s delightful, yes, and it’s also dicey. For every handful of couples I counsel who seem truly prepared to make a life-long commitment, there’s one couple who hasn’t given much thought to the decades that will follow their terrifically fun wedding night. Those are the couples I fret over. People get married for love, but they also – sometimes – get married out of fear.

In my 20s, I watched a number of my own friends enter into what sociologists call “starter marriages.”² I wasn’t surprised, for example, when “Joan” and “Veronica” each got divorced less than two years into their marriages. They both married out of college, and I’d been a bridesmaid at their lavish weddings (it’s so much nicer to wear this robe and stole at weddings instead of bridesmaid dresses!).

I’ve always believed that fear played a role in pushing Joan, Veronica, and so many young adults to the altar: fear of confronting the world alone, fear that no one else would love them, fear that “everyone else” was getting married and they never would, fear of living a lonely life.

*What keeps us from admitting our fears, and wrestling with them?
What happens when we don’t acknowledge our fears?*

Some fears, of course, serve us well: they’re the ones that push us to grow and learn in safe ways. Other fears shout out: “yellow light!” or “red light!” Only by knowing ourselves well can we discern between the two, and winnow the helpful fears from the harmful.

I believe that the latter, when unspoken, lurk like little demons in our inner shadows. When we don’t acknowledge them, they make mischief in our psyches and lead us into situations where we’re forced to meet them, face to face. Some people fear living a lonely life, and end up in a marriage that’s lonelier than single life. Other people fear the shame of admitting their addiction, and lock themselves more tightly in its imprisoning grip. Still others – like me – fear the inadequacies and limits of our true selves; in trying to be someone else, we back ourselves into corners of vulnerability and breaking points.

That’s the kind of fear I explore today – not “healthy” fears, nor phobias, nor the fears we have about circumstances beyond our control – for no other reason than having learned something about it recently. “Intelligence is like 4-wheel drive,” says Garrison Keillor, “it just enables you to get stuck in more remote places.” I can vouch for the fact that fear does about the same thing. “4-Wheel drive fear” got me stuck, both literally and figuratively, in a very remote place...all because of what I was hiding from.

Here’s the story:

My best friend from college, Loretta, has lived in west Africa for a number of years, so we decided that last month was the perfect time for me to visit her in Bamako, Mali. Since she had to work on a grant application during my visit, Loretta suggested that I might amuse myself by traveling to “Dogon country”³ (or *pays dogon*), an intriguing geographical and cultural area in a far-flung corner of Mali.

I don’t know how you feel about traveling, but in my experience it’s always been a little

like falling down a rabbit hole: each step brings me more fully into an unknown world, both magical and disorienting. So when I arrived in Mali about six weeks ago, my wanderlust took a beating: vast cultural differences left my head spinning more than usual, but so did simple communication gaps (it quickly became evident that my college French wasn't up to snuff).

I began to feel a whisper of fear whenever I thought about leaving Loretta and traveling by myself...and that apprehension surprised me. It wasn't like me; it certainly didn't square with the image I have of myself: a Seasoned Traveler, an intrepid and self-sufficient Citizen of the World. Instead of finding some stillness and cozying up to those feelings, though, I drowned them in trip-planning-busyness. While Loretta and I were busy finding maps, a backpack, and advice from expatriates who'd gone to Dogon country, my fears began to gun their engines, and shifted into first gear.

As it became evident that my complicated journey would require carefully-timed "bush taxi" rides through two different villages, my fears – still somewhere outside of my soul's peripheral view – slid into second gear. Not only would I leave city comforts for a bare mattress in a *campement*; not only would I be separated from Loretta, with her perfect French – now there was the possibility of getting stuck mid-journey. In truth, I wasn't afraid of coming into harm's way. I was impatient with my own timidity, my American need for timetables, my *tres horrible francais*... Everything would be better, some part of me decided, if I just soldiered through and into the backcountry.

On the appointed day, Loretta deposited me at the "bus stop" – a few wooden benches under a canopy of palm branches – where I'd make the first leg of my trip to a village called Bandiagara. In Mali, as in so many other developing countries, the system works like this: the bush taxi is a 7-seater Peugeot, circa 1976, but it doesn't leave the bus stop until there are nine passengers in it (seatbelts? Ha.). The driver is the tenth passenger. The chickens tied to the roof rack (alive) don't count.

I was passenger number six, so it was a long wait until the last three tickets were sold. Finally, we were on the road. By the time we arrived in Bandiagara, the sun was dipping on the horizon but I still needed to travel two hours north, to a hamlet called Sanga. The road between Bandiagara and Sanga is so crude that the two hour journey covers only 45 kilometers, or 28 miles, and is accessible to only two kinds of motor vehicles: motorbikes and 4-wheel-drive trucks known as "quatre-quatre," or "four-fours." Tourists almost always charter a 4x4 with a driver, at significant cost, so solo travelers often buy a seat and squeeze in along with a group.

In response to my inquiries, several people promised me that a quatre-quatre was "on its way, right now," to whisk me to Sanga. None materialized. It's part of Mali's culture, I discovered, to make every effort to please people. As a result, Malians are eager say what they think you want to hear; when you ask whether a bush taxi is available, they say

yes... but then the truth of the matter becomes evident: you're stuck.

After an hour of inquiries and no bush taxi, my chances of finding a ride to Sanga were growing as dim as the day's waning sunlight. But I *had* to get to there, I reasoned (or was it the demons' chorus?). I couldn't give up and stay in hotel at this half-way point. What kind of traveler would I be? My fears slipped up a gear, into third, but I wouldn't let my cautious, 'fraidy-cat self trump my Plan.

Thus it was that I was coaxed onto the back of a *moto* by a crowd of cheerful young men. My new friend Cedu, a smiley 21-year old, would drive me the two hours into Sanga. My big, borrowed backpack and I hopped onto the motorcycle and off we went, down the pitted road into the twilight.

I know what you're thinking.

It sounds bizarre, but I had no fear whatsoever of this stranger; no fear that he would harm me. I found the people of Mali – of every age and every gender – to be the gentlest and kindest people I've met (and I include Canadians in my comparison). Still, when I related this story to Gordon, he called hopping onto Cedu's motorcycle a "fearless" thing to do.

Let's be clear: it wasn't a *lack* of fear that put me on the *moto* – fear drove me to it: fear of backing out, fear of admitting my lack of confidence, fear of not being "adventurous." This is the simplest way I can explain it: riding on the back of a stranger's *moto*, down a dirt road, in the dark, in a country where I couldn't speak the language and had no means of helping myself in an emergency....? Well, all of that was *less frightening* than finding a patch of stillness and gently making friends with my Inner Chicken, and perhaps altering my plans accordingly.

*What keeps us from admitting our fears, and wrestling with them?
What happens when we don't acknowledge our fears?*

It was a beautiful ride, and Cedu was a skilled motorcycle rider. We wove between scrubby hills, the sky turned pink, the stars popped out around us. But (yes, there is a but) the ride went on and on, the sky got darker, and the "road" [mostly dirt, a few worn patches of pavement, lots of little bridges, lots of big boulders and deep pits] was hiding patches of sand that – twice – nearly took us to ground. By the time darkness had descended completely, my backpack and I had had the enthusiasm jostled out of us.

And then our headlight went out. And reality sank in.

There were no villages anywhere – just two strangers who didn't speak each others' language, stranded in the wilderness. This was, for me, the living embodiment of "four-

wheel drive fear.”

Let’s review: How had I arrived at this place, of getting stuck in a remote and uncomfortable situation? Tracing the story back, it goes something like this:

I had had an idea of what I was “supposed” to do, how I was supposed to measure up to the other expatriates who took the same journey with ease, how I was supposed to *feel* about it. I had turned a deaf ear to those fears, back when they were running at a low-grade hum.

*What keeps us from admitting our fears, and wrestling with them?
What happens when we don’t acknowledge them?*

We get stuck in even more remote places, that’s what.

The story has a happy ending: after a lot of tinkering, Cedu brought the headlight back to life. (I take some credit for this feat, having muttered the word “please” approximately eighty-four times, in two languages.) Because the light returned to a fraction of its original brightness, we had to drive the rest of the way into Sanga extremely slowly, but we made it to my *campement* safely. The rest of my visit to Dogon country was fascinating, and mercifully uneventful.

(And there are actually two pieces of corollary good news at this point in my merry story:

1. Loretta consoled me by confirming that, even if the headlight had remained broken, things would have been fine. I had a sleeping bag, some water, and a power bar in my backpack. I had Cedu, his moto, and gas in the tank. No harm would have come to me if we’d had to sleep by the side of the road. What Loretta didn’t see – before the headlight broke – were the little rodents scampering across the road at every turn.

2. I didn’t get a good look at the “road” until I returned home, the morning I left Sanga (...in a quatre-quatre). Ignorance is bliss. The gutted, pitted, 45-kilometer course that Cedu had traversed is to a “road” what my French is to the collected works of Molière.)

*

I’m the first person to admit that this “travel adventure” is a superficial example of how our fears can drive us into remote and vulnerable places. I’m also the first to admit that it’s a story of privilege. But it holds lessons, nonetheless: self-betrayal comes at a price. The more we ignore the voices that speak from within us, the more we get stuck. We gain nothing when we hide our fears from others – except pride, which doesn’t help once you’re stuck.

In this morning's story about Rabbi Zusya, he told his disciples that what he feared most about dying was knowing that he would be asked *Why were you not Zusya?* He feared having to account for all the ways he had denied himself, turned away from his inner self.

What if we, too, were called to account for the ways that we betray ourselves? What if we were asked why we didn't live from the honest place of our own souls?

I believe that this is one of the great purposes of a Beloved Community like ours. As a congregation, we've woven Live Oak into a place where people can become fully themselves. This congregation is a safe place for people to voice the fears that hold them back; to wrestle with the fears that drive them forward. In that sharing and listening, we come to realize that we're not alone. When the third Principle of Unitarian Universalism affirms that we practice "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth," it means that we invite each another to live little more freely, to be a little more ourselves, a little more whole...with the wings of our souls unfurled.

As we continue to make each other strong and whole,
may we practice this loving acceptance of ourselves and of one another.
May it be so.

Endnotes

1. This story, and one version of the questions, appears in *Doorways to the Soul*, ed. Elisa Davy Pearmain.
2. See, for example, *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony* by Pamela Paul.
3. Named for the Dogon people who inhabit this region, live on top of, and at the base of, a sheer escarpment called *le falaise*; it slices across the plains of Mali. Small adobe houses are tucked into sides and foot of the cliff, forming a picturesque cultural pocket. Although I don't know the authors, there are excellent online scrapbooks of journeys through Dogon country, including <http://homepage.mac.com/melissaenderle/mali/pages/dogontravel.html> and www.hullsgrove.com/DogonCountry.html. Or, send me an email (minister[at]liveoakgoleta[dot]org) and I'll send you a link to an online album of some of my own photos.