

“Let Your Faith Be Bigger Than Your Fear: A Lesson From My Mom”

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Reading: “All that we have Been, All that we will become”

by Leslie Ahuvah Fails

All that we have been separately
and all that we will become together
is stretched out before and behind us
like stars scattered across a canvas of sky.

We stand at the precipice, arms locked
together like tandem skydivers
working up the courage to jump.

Tell me, friends:

What have we got to lose?

Our fear of failure?

Our mistrust of our own talents?

What have we got to lose?

A poverty of the spirit?

The lie that we are alone?

What wonders await us in the space

between the first leap

and the moment our feet, our wheels

however we move our bodies

across this precious earth

touch down softly on unknown soil?

What have we got to lose

that we can't replace with some

previously unimaginable joy?

Blessed are you, Spirit of Life

who has sustained us, enlivened us
and enabled us to reach this moment.

Give us courage in our leaping

**Reading: “A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark”
by Jan Richardson**

Go slow
if you can.
Slower.
More slowly still.
Friendly dark
or fearsome,
this is no place
to break your neck
by rushing,
by running,
by crashing into
what you cannot see.

Then again,
it is true:
different darks
have different tasks,
and if you
have arrived here unawares,
if you have come
in peril
or in pain,
this might be no place

you should dawdle.

I do not know
what these shadows
ask of you,
what they might hold
that means you good
or ill.

It is not for me
to reckon
whether you should linger
or you should leave.

But this is what
I can ask for you:

That in the darkness
there be a blessing.
That in the shadows
there be a welcome.
That in the night
you be encompassed
by the Love that knows
your name.

Sermon/Homily: “Let Your Faith Be Bigger Than Your Fear: A Lesson From My Mom”

When I was a little girl, and if we’re honest, also when I was not so little, I was deeply afraid of the dark. I was certain that there were monsters, devils or demons hiding in the closet, under the bed, just outside the window, in the shadowy corner, pretty much everywhere. I would wrap my blankets tight around me, and try to fall asleep in fear that

I would be attacked or eaten while I slept. My mother was a nurse, and usually worked the overnight shift, so she wasn't home to protect me all the time. And my dad, well, he was not the kind of person you woke up in the middle of the night without a "really good reason". I had learned from prior experience, that terrifying monsters under the bed were not a "really good reason" to wake up Dad.

Lots of nights, I would just pray and pray and pray until I fell asleep. I would pray that God would protect me from whatever was hiding in the dark. But if my fear got particularly bad, I would sometimes creep downstairs to the basement and turn on the TV. I remember watching reruns of "The Three Stooges" in the middle of the night. I would laugh at them until I felt better and was tired enough that I could fall asleep. Other nights, I would sneak into my little sister's room and crawl into bed with her. She was little, but I figured if the monsters came, at least they would eat her first, and I would have a fighting chance. And sleeping next to another person is just comforting, especially when you know that the someone sleeping next to you loves you with her whole being. There is a power in love to fight fear.

I realize looking back on the little girl version of myself, that the strategies I used to deal with fear are still useful to me as an adult. When I snuck into the basement to watch "The Three Stooges", I would laugh and laugh at the ridiculous slapstick antics. And laughter is a powerful antidote to fear. A wonderful example of how laughter can banish fear is found in the Harry Potter books. In the universe of Harry Potter, there is a monster called a boggart that takes the form of whatever you are most scared of. The spell to banish a boggart is "Riddikulus!" In order to properly execute the spell, the witch or wizard must reimagine the thing that scares them in a funny or ridiculous way. For example, if you were extremely afraid of spiders, your boggart might appear as a huge spider. In order to defeat it, you might imagine the spider doing a silly tap dance routine when you cast the Riddikulus spell. Your ability to laugh in the face of fear renders it powerless.

I think this is part of the reason late night political comedy talk shows are so popular. It is not uncommon for people to watch the news and become overwhelmed with fear and despair. And when done well, these comedy shows allow us to process that fear in a safe way. Stephen Colbert, a late night television show host, said in an interview, "Hopefully the best thing I can do is make them feel better... make them not be afraid. That's what my goal is, to make the audience not be afraid because then they will know what they actually think. Because when you're afraid, you can't think. And fear, as Frank Herbert says in Dune, "Fear is the mind killer." But if you're laughing, you can't be afraid. And so if you laugh, I know you can think."

Laughter allows us to see scary situations from a different perspective. Fear literally closes down parts of our minds. When we are afraid, our minds respond with the primal instincts of fight, flight, or freeze. The intellectual and creative parts of our brains disengage as our body prepares to fight for survival. When we laugh, we re-open those pathways. We make it possible for creativity and intelligent thought to enter back into the equation, and we can approach our fear with the whole of our being, not just with a gut reaction.

So, one coping mechanism when we are afraid is to find the humor in the situation.

Another way to deal with fear is to hold onto faith. For some people here, that is a faith in a deity or deities. For others it is faith in science and logic. For still others it is faith in the power of nature or faith in community or even simply a strong faith in our best selves.

I remember as a child, one of my favorite hymns at church was called “Be Not Afraid”. The chorus was:

“Be not afraid
I go before you always,
Come follow me and I will give you rest.”

I think that song was so comforting because I was a very scared child. I put up a good front, but I was scared of everything. Not only was I terrified of the dark, but I was always afraid that I wasn't good enough, that people didn't or wouldn't like me, and that bad things would happen to me or my family. But I think that all of my fears originated from one primary fear, the fear of being alone. And this hymn always comforted me because it made me feel that no matter where I was or where I was going, I would not be alone, that God would be with me. In fact, I think that pretty much summed up the theology of my childhood. God would protect me from the scariness of the world. Period. Even though my religious understanding has changed radically since then, this hymn still takes me back to that place of comfort, a place of feeling safe.

When I think back on it, I can vividly remember my mother singing this specific hymn in her never-quite-exactly-on-key-but-still-beautiful voice. My mom was once told that she shouldn't sing because she wasn't good at it, and it made her self-conscious about singing for the rest of her life. But I am so glad that she still sang songs to me, and with me, and around me. Because she really likes to sing, and she loves to praise God by singing. And it is because she was courageous enough to do a thing that made her

happy regardless of what others may or may not think about it, without having to be perfect at it, that I have this amazing memory of my mom.

So when I think of this song now, I don't think as much of Jesus or the God of my childhood. I think of my mother. And I would be willing to bet that this hymn was also sung by her mother. And when I think of my mother and my grandmother singing this song, the lyrics have a different meaning to me:

“Be not afraid
I go before you always,
Come follow me and I will give you rest.”

I think of all of the times my mother was there for me, the times I was heartbroken, the times I was exhausted, the times I was overwhelmed, and the times I felt alone. I think of all of those times that she comforted me, and loved me, and put up with my nonsense. I think of all of the times she provided me a place to rest my physical body as well as a place to rest my heart and mind. And I think of all of the times I am called to follow in her example and show the same love and compassion for my own children and for others in my life. The times I am called to be a place of rest and calm in the midst of the storms that are their lives. The times that I can provide a safe place where they do not have to be afraid of the unknown, at least for a little while.

And these thoughts of my mother and grandmother and all of the lessons I've learned from all of the people who have gone before me help me hold on to faith. I remember that others have made it through scary times and frightening situations. I remember that I am not the first to journey through the unknown. Generations of people have stepped out into fear with nothing more than their faith to sustain them. And I can do it too. And so can you. We are not alone, and we need not be afraid. We need only follow the path of love they forged.

And for the times when the fear is so overwhelming that we can't find a way to laugh, and our faith is faltering, we know that we always have each other.

When I was a little girl, I had a pretty narrow definition of what church was. To me, it was a place to go to learn about a mysterious God that I couldn't see and could never quite get an understanding of, but I was told that he loved me and would protect me. Church was a place for my little girl self to find protection from the fear that threatened to constantly overwhelm me. And I needed that. To be honest, I still do.

We live in a scary world. There is so much negativity, so many things that are out of our control, constant media coverage of the worst the world has to offer... We are continuously surrounded by messages designed to manipulate us by playing on our fears. And it is easy to become overwhelmed and controlled by that fear. And I think, at least in part, that is why we come to church. Because we need a place to feel safe, a place where we can hear messages of hope to counteract all of the messages of fear. But most of all, we come together as a religious community to form connections with other people. Human beings are social creatures. We need community, in some form, in order to thrive.

And church is a place where we build community. We create relationships with people who can make us laugh and give us a new perspective. We develop friendships with people who can hold us up when we are struggling. We find partners to work with us to fight for justice in the world. In church, we find a community of people which sings with us, and to us, and around us. So that when we are afraid, we can remember those songs of love and hope and courage, and know that we are not alone and we need not be afraid.

Church also provides us with a rich tradition upon which we can call for examples of how to remain strong in our values. We can recall the history of our church, how our ancestors and elders have courageously gone before us to forge a path toward justice and peace, and how we can find strength in their examples and leadership as we continue their work.

When church does what it is supposed to do, it is a place of unconditional love, welcome and acceptance for those who seek to live in sacred covenant with one another. We can be the pillars of loving strength for each other when the darkness is a little too scary to handle on our own. We can be a place of comfort and rest for one another when the fight is just a little too hard to handle alone. We can be sources of laughter and joy and songs for one another when the fear is just a little too overwhelming.

And one of the beautiful things about Unitarian Universalism is that church is not confined to one building, or the communion wafer, or one understanding of the divine mystery. Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal religion. That means that our faith is dependent upon our relationships. For Unitarian Universalists: church happens during meaningful conversations over coffee, discussions during book groups, holding someone's hand as they lie in the hospital, sitting with someone as they cry, making silly faces at a fussy toddler waiting in line at the grocery store so that their tired parent

doesn't have to deal with yet another melt down, playing with our pets, marching for social justice, appreciating the beauty of the birds on a hike.

Universalist theology says that my fate is wrapped up with yours and with all of creation. Whenever we form a connection with another person or with nature, we can find a version of church. We can remember that we are not alone. We can not be alone. We are each a part of one another and we are all part of this interconnected web of all existence. So have faith; you are never truly alone. And you need not be afraid.

“Be not afraid
I go before you always,
Come follow me and I will give you rest.”

So may it be.