

“The Love the Casts Out Fear”
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Reading from *Wind, Sand and Stars* by Antoine de St. Exupery. Set in North Africa, 1926

[There are] hours in which a pilot finds suddenly that he has slipped beyond the confines of this world. All that night the radio messages sent from the ports in the Sahara concerning our position had been inaccurate, and my radio operator, Neri, and I had been drawn out of our course. Suddenly, seeing the gleam of water at the bottom of a crevasse of fog, I tacked sharply in the direction of the coast; but it was by then impossible for us to say how long we had been flying towards the high seas. Nor were we certain of making the coast, for our fuel was probably low. And even so, once we had reached it we would still have to make port – after the moon had set.

We had no means of angular orientation, were already deafened, and were bit by bit growing blind. The moon like a pallid ember began to go out in the banks of fog. Overhead the sky was filling with clouds, and we flew thenceforth between cloud and fog in a world voided of all substance and all light. The ports that signaled us had given up trying to tell us where we were. “No bearings, no bearings,” was all their message, for our voice reached them from everywhere and nowhere. With sinking hearts Neri and I leaned out, he on his side and I one mine, to see if anything, anything at all, was distinguishable in this void. Already our tired eyes were seeing things – errant signs, delusive flashes, phantoms.

And suddenly, when already we were in despair, low on the horizon a brilliant point was unveiled on our port bow. A wave of joy went through me. Neri leaned forward, and I could hear him singing. It could not but be the beacon of an airport, for after dark the whole Sahara goes black and forms a great dead expanse. That light twinkled for a space – and then went out! We had been steering for a star which was visible for a few minutes only, just before setting on the horizon between the layer of fog and the clouds.

Then other stars took up the game, and with a sort of dogged hope we set our course for each of them in turn. Each time that a light lingered awhile, we performed the same crucial experiment. Neri would send his message to the airport at Cisneros: “Beacon in view. Put out your light and flash three times.” And Cisneros would put out its beacon and flash three times while the hard light at which we gazed would not, incorruptible star, so much as wink. And despite our dwindling fuel we continued to nibble at the golden bait which each time seemed more surely the true light of a beacon, was each time a promise of a landing and of life – and we had each time to change our star.

And with that we knew ourselves to be lost in interplanetary space among a thousand inaccessible planets, we who sought only the one veritable planet, our own, that planet on which alone we should find our familiar countryside, the houses of our friends, our treasures...

And from that earth of men, that earth docile to the reaping of grain and the harvesting of the grape, bearing its rivers asleep in their fields, its villages clinging to their hillsides, our ship was separated by astronomical distances.

And Neri still prayed to the stars.

Sermon

Fear. Marc Siegel, a physician who has studied fear in American culture, writes that “fear is more than a state of mind. It's chemical. It is present in the circuitry of our brains, in the neurochemical exchanges between nerves.” (Marc Siegel, *False Alarm: the Truth About the Epidemic of Fear*, 2006) Fear lives in our bodies, and has a powerful way of lingering in there, despite information we have that contradicts it. There is really no way of thinking our way out of it. Fear, he says, is not governed by reason. Prayer, whether you are a believer or not, is an ancient, human response when we are deeply afraid. So a person might pray to the stars.

Another thing we know about fear is that, like all emotions, it is highly contagious. Just a few years ago, Robert and I were returning home from General Assembly in Long Beach, California. Now this was 2004, when our expectations for comfort and safety in air travel are so high we no longer consider flying an act of daring as it was in the 1920s. So when the air in our cabin started getting very warm, and the flight steward came on over the loudspeaker, we were taken somewhat by surprise. Something was going wrong with the cabin pressure, we were told calmly. Nothing to worry about – but we did need to make an, um, *unplanned landing*. I felt something clutch in my chest. It didn't let go when he added that we were in easy reach of Grand Junction, Colorado, and that their airport was preparing for our arrival. I'd seen enough movies; this sort of announcement is made to disguise the impending doom that awaited us all. Apparently, I wasn't alone. People burst into tears, hung onto loved ones, repeated prayers, and pulled out cell phones.

My husband was puzzled. *What's the problem*, he wondered. *Why is everyone so scared?* Blessed with a knowledge about most things mechanical, he had taken in the facts, and was instantly calmed by them. I was able to borrow some of his calm, and that started to help. What really helped was the flight steward. He came on the loudspeaker and said, “Look around you, ladies and germs.” (He really said 'ladies and germs'.) “Look at the faces of your flight crew. See how they're smiling? They are not worried. You shouldn't be, either.” Upon our landing, which ranks as one of the smoothest I have ever felt, he announced to us, as if we were an excited group of Italian tourists landing in Vegas, “Welcome to Grand Junction, Colorado!” I will always love that man.

Fear is actually designed to protect us animals from immediate danger. It's a reflex that mobilizes us, as in “Run! There's a tiger!” “Run! There's a tiger!” is a handy reflex to have. The problem comes when we are not responding to an actual danger but a perceived one. Or even a remote one. We now know that human beings, despite our sophisticated intelligence, can respond just as intensely to images and words as to immediate dangers. This makes *remote* dangers seem like they're right next to us. On a chemical level, then, we cannot tell the difference between a tiger that is standing right next to us, and one that is on television. If people around us are afraid of the tiger, chances are, we will be, too. And these tigers come to us quite regularly now, thanks to 24-hour news stations and the internet.

“The fear reaction is normal and even protective,” says Siegel, “provided that it wears off after awhile. The body needs time to adjust to new circumstances, after which it should return to a state of normal function.” The continuous cycle of news items that scare us, Siegel argues, doesn't allow us to calm down. He cites this bombardment of news – which tends to play on fear and conflict to grab our attention - as a critical reason the events of the day have Americans more worried and more stressed than ever before.

Take the financial news. (Please.) When the Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac crisis hit, I was visiting friends who like to watch the evening news during supper. I don't usually watch television news, unless you count *The Daily Show*, which we probably shouldn't. I was startled by the tone and focus of the network news, which seemed to be *fear*. The longer the story on Freddie and Fannie went on, no matter how many credible experts said that their actual fiscal health might not actually be that bad, it was too late. The fires were stoked, the jungle drums were beating. Every repetition of the story made the situation seem scarier. I could feel it, and so could investors and money managers. Shortly thereafter, the feds stepped in and offered backing to calm the panic, to soothe the market gods.

In *Atlantic* magazine, Theologian Harvey Cox writes that the Free Market truly has become God for many people. The Market, which he says he capitalizes to “signify the mystery that enshrouds it, as well as the reverence it inspires in business folk”, the Market shares many attributes that have traditionally been assigned to God. It is omnipotent, or all-powerful, in that it seems to have the power to define what is real, since it has the endless capacity to turn all of creation into commodities. As when the priest would hold up ordinary bread and wine and declare that they were now body and blood, the vehicles of the holy, the Market does the reverse. It holds up “things that have been held sacred and [transmutes them] into interchangeable merchandise. Land is a good example. For millennia, it has held various meanings, many of them [spiritual]. It has been Mother Earth, ancestral resting place, holy mountain, enchanted forest, tribal homeland, sacred turf, and much more. But when the Market's Sanctus bell rings and the [Wall Street mass] begins, all these complex meanings of land melt into one: real estate.”

Likewise, the Market is considered omniscient, or all-knowing. It tells us what goods should be valued at, how much people should be paid, which in our culture is highly indicative of their worth. “But how do we know the Market's will?” Cox asks. “In days of old,” he says, “seers entered a trance state and then informed anxious seekers what kind of mood the gods were in, and whether this was an auspicious time to begin a journey, get married, or start a war... Today, the Market's fickle will is clarified by daily experts from Wall Street... Thus we can learn on a day-to-day basis that The Market is “apprehensive,” “relieved”, “nervous,” or even “jubilant.”

“Divine seers of the Market's moods are the high priests of its mysteries. To act against their admonitions is to risk excommunication and possibly damnation. Today, for example, if any government's policy vexes The Market, those responsible for the irreverence will be made to suffer. That The Market is not at all displeased by downsizing or a growing income gap, or can be gleeful about the expansion of cigarette sales to Asian young people, should not cause anyone to question its ultimate omniscience. [It simply] works in mysterious ways.” (Harvey Cox, “The Market as God” in *The Atlantic*, July/August 1999)

The Market gods are not in a great mood these days, and it has a lot of people nervous. When pollsters ask what people fear most, they put the economy at the top of the list. Most fears, says Buddhist teacher Tara Brach, are about failure. Either our own failure, or the failure of something we count on. A failing economy is pretty scary. Whether this tiger is on television or standing right next to us, it seems to threaten our very sense of survival - it's about being able to eat and keep a roof over our heads.

How will it all come out? Will one of our presidential candidates save us from this mess? Will

technological innovations create jobs and products that stimulate growth? I don't know! If I did, I'd be working somewhere else. But I do know that we cannot simply hold our breath through all of this. Nor can we just hunker down and protect what we possess. We must find a way to live in a time of anxiety.

Tara Brach says that it is almost impossible to eliminate fear, but it is possible to find freedom and balance in the midst of it. Where does that freedom come from? I believe it comes, in part, by insisting on remaining caring, human beings, connected to one another. The Market God encourages us to look at ourselves primarily as consumers. This is a pretty bleak self-identity, and a very bleak way of being connected to other people – by the purchases we make. The late William Sloan Coffin once said that this is the primary religious question in America today: Do we define ourselves as consumers, or as neighbors? Do we see ourselves ultimately as individuals in competition for a piece of an ever-shrinking pie, or do we see ourselves as neighbors, deeply connected to one another?

We tend to live very separate, unconnected lives. We like to think we are in control, that we are somehow the gods of our own little universe. There is a biography of one of the founders of AA, Bill W. It's called "Not God". It was one of his founding ideas in starting the program. Alcoholics, including himself, he said, tend to think they can control every aspect of their lives – that they are, in fact, God. So much of our life, of course, is out of our control. But some of us don't get this, and we cling onto this notion that we can handle it all. Don't need any help, thanks. I've got it. Being unable to face this inability to control is so scary that it brings people to drink. Or eat, or do drugs, or spend excessively, or do any number of crazy things in the face of mounting evidence we are not in control of the people and circumstances around us. The beginning of recovery from drinking, and the beginning of a spiritual life, is to first admit that you are not God.

Addicts, of which I am one, are then urged to find a higher power on which to rely, in order to recover. Whenever I am fearful that there won't be enough, I have been taught in my 12-step program to ask what my higher power is today. That is, what do I consider my means of survival, the source of blessings in my life? If it's my job, success, a person, or even my own ego and willpower, I have to recognize that I'm thinking way too small.

I have to remember that I am part of something larger, that I am part of the interdependent web of all existence. We have to remember that there is simply more to this world than we can grasp at any given time. And we must decide, I am convinced, that there is love at the center of it.

Sufi poet Rumi writes,

For 60 years I have been forgetful,
every minute, but not for a second,
has this flowing toward me stopped or slowed.
I deserve nothing. Today I recognize
that I am the guest the mystics talk about.
I play this living music for my host.
Everything today is for the host.

I am the guest. The guest of whom? There are many names for this host he refers to. The earth, God, the interdependent web, the Tao. (And I'm not talking about the Dow Jones, here.) But there is a source beyond myself, and all religious practice involves going beyond ourselves to learn

what is, and find our right relationship to it. To feel our sense of belonging to it. And it always starts with deepening my connection to other people.

The gods we tend to lean on do fail us, regularly. Marriages end. Jobs vanish. Loved ones die. And when they do, life as we know it ends, and we are afraid nothing will come after it. And we are held up, somehow. This flowing towards us doesn't really stop. Each one of us, I imagine, could tell a story of coming back after such a life-ending event. Each one of us could name the people who held us up during those times.

I'm sure you're all wondering what happened to the pilot in our story, and his radio operator Nero. They managed to find the right direction and distance of destination, but it was two hours away. Since they had only one hour's worth of fuel left, they headed for the coast, in hopes that an airport, any airport, would appear. They were not optimistic, and were, for the most part, alone. Suddenly, messages started coming in over the radio.

The airports one by one had been waking each other up. Into our [solitude] broke the voices of Agadir, Casablanca, Dakar. The radio stations at each of these towns had warned the airports and the ports had flashed the news to our comrades. Bit by bit they were gathering round us as round a sick-bed. Vain warmth, but human warmth after all. Helpless concern, but affectionate at any rate.

And suddenly into this conclave burst Toulouse, the headquarters of the Line three thousand miles away, worried along with the rest. Toulouse broke in without a word of greeting, simply to say sharply: 'Your reserve tanks bigger than standard. You have two hours left. Proceed to Cisneros.'

Fear is sometimes answered by another voice. It's often a voice that can do nothing to rescue you, but keeps you company, keeps you warm. Occasionally, it is a voice that gives you exactly what you need – the knowledge that you have more within you, more available to you, than you, in your tight little fear box, can see. I urge us as a church to be such voices to one another, and to the world. May we have the discipline to stay neighbors to one another. May we feel gratitude for all that holds us up and will continue to hold us, no matter what. Amen.