

The Culture of Fear and the Call to Courageous Living

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Over recent weeks and months, events in the political and social arena have left us, shocked, angered, bemused, and fearful, along with a host of other emotions. The vote for Britain to leave the European Union immediately set in motion events that would probably lack credibility if they were written as a work of fiction. David Cameron's decision to "fall on his sword" caused Conservative politicians to throw aside their pretence of unity as they jostled for position. BREXIT poster boy Boris Johnson fell by the wayside with his running mate, Michael Gove's knife lodged firmly between his shoulder blades. Gove's own campaign came off the rails as a result of his perceived treachery. On the other side of the House, Labour MPs took the BREXIT vote as an opportunity to turn and rend their leader Jeremy Corbin in an unsuccessful attempt to oust him from the Labour leadership.

If the shenanigans in UK politics were not enough to cause us to throw our hands up in despair, events across The Pond are even more disturbing. When Donald Trump decided to run for president, he gave political commentators, satirists and comedians an abundance of ammunition to poke fun at the prospect. However, this bad joke has brought us to the brink of nightmare scenario in which the United States may actually install a power-hungry, nationalistic, misogynistic, racist, to govern the affairs of the most powerful nation on the planet.

Even as we pondered the political madness unfolding in Western politics, we looked on in disbelief as social and news media displayed the horrific reality of the latest killings of black civilians by police officers in the United States. The names of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille have been added to those of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin and a host of others, as victims of a system in which the lives of African-Americans appear to carry less value than the majority population. Black Lives Matter and other social justice movements have been spurred on by justifiable anger at these senseless deaths.

Over the last few months, it seems that we have barely had time to process the grief of one atrocity, before another one grabs the headlines. The slaying of a priest in France; the killing of two and wounding of seventeen teenagers in a Florida night club; the failed attempt of a Syrian suicide bomber in Ansbach, Germany; the death of nine individuals at the hand of a teenage gunman who subsequently killed himself in Munich; the Bastille Day Massacre of eighty-four people in Nice; the Brussels Airport bombing in March etc. etc. We identify with the victims and their families because they were people just like us, going about their everyday lives.

As I reflected on all of these political and social events, it occurred to me that there is a common theme permeating each scenario - FEAR. We live in a culture of fear. Consider the opposing arguments advocated by the protagonists in the referendum debates. Those who argued for "REMAIN" painted the picture of a nation plunged into an economic Armageddon following exit from the EU. BREXIT proponents pictured a nation overrun by economic migrants and refugees providing

cover for terrorist's intent on bringing Western civilisation to its knees. Consider the rhetoric of Donald Trump. Having listened to Trump's speech at the Republican Convention, one commentator made the scary observation that if you gave him a German accent, his demonisation of immigrants and Muslims is strikingly similar to Hitler's demonisation of the Jews in the 1930s and 1940s. Trump's popularity brings to mind a statement attributed to Henri Spaak former Secretary General of NATO.

He reportedly said that, "What we want is a man of sufficient stature to hold the alliances of all people and to lift us out of the economic morass into which we are sinking. Send us such a man, and be he god or devil, we will receive him." I would contend that it is fear and the promise of easy answers that has motivated the choices of ordinary people on both sides of the Atlantic.

I believe that fear is a prime factor in the appalling rate of black lives lost in officer related shootings. I watched the video posted by Philando Castille's girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds in the immediate aftermath of his shooting. As Castille slouched wounded, Officer Jeronimo Yanez is heard shouting, "I told him to get his hand out". In the agitation of his voice, I heard one thing - fear! Now, before the argument is made that racism is the prime factor in these incidents, I would submit that racism along with all the emotions that it engenders, is built on a platform of fear - fear of that which is different. The aftermath of the BREXIT vote has seen an unprecedented rise in racially motivated crimes accompanied by the recurring invective, "Go back to where you came from!" Fear gives rise to hatred and violence for the very reason that people often swat wasps and step on spiders - to eradicate the thing of which they are afraid.

The reality is that we live in a culture of fear. A recent report indicated that the fear of terrorism has resulted in an unexpected boost for the British holiday industry as holidaymakers are increasingly choosing "staycations" rather than risk the perceived dangers of foreign travel. In his book *The Science of Fear*, Daniel Gardner states that after 9/11, Americans on mass abandoned the airlines in favour of their cars. The year after 9/11 statistics for deaths on the road rose to unprecedented numbers that levelled off as people drifted back to the airlines.

The research indicated that the most dangerous part of an aeroplane flight is actually the drive to the airport. The year after 9/11 thousands of Americans died not because of the reality of terrorism, but because of fear. However, the reality was that in the entire history of commercial air flights, the safest time to fly was immediately after 9/11. The fictional character Cypher Raige said it well in the movie *After Earth*, "The only place that fear can exist is in our thoughts of the future. It is a product of our imagination, causing us to fear things that do not at present and may not ever exist."

In spite of the negative fallout from fear, fear is not necessarily a bad thing. It is simply an emotion that is designed to prepare us to face a real or perceived danger. As Samuel Johnson put it, "Fear [may serve as] a preservative from evil; but its duty, like that of other passions, is not to overbear reason, but to assist it; nor should it be suffered to tyrannise in the imagination, to raise phantoms of horror, or beset life with . . . distresses." Mark Twain put it this way - he said,

“I’ve lived through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened.” The problem with fear is not its existence - it is how we choose to relate to it that is the issue. We can fortify our borders. We can build walls to keep people out. We can install sophisticated alarm systems in our homes and take every possible measure to safeguard our physical well-being. However, no amount of external security can protect us against the fears we have internalised. some of the categories of people who ultimately reject God outright.

Among the, murderers, and occultist, and the morally bankrupt are the fearful. Now the Bible does not condemn us for experiencing fear. That’s a very human emotion. However, the word translated fearful in Revelation 21:8 denotes those who “have the spirit of slavish “fear,” who through fear of man are not bold for God, or “draw back.” There is a difference between having fears and fear having us. Having fear is natural - giving into fear is a choice. On numerous occasions the Bible tells us to “be of good courage”. The reality is that courage and fear are not mutually exclusive concepts. In fact, you cannot exercise courage if you do not experience fear because as Gandhi said, “Courage is not the absence of fear, it is a positive response to fear.”

Fear is so insidious that our challenge is to recognise it for what it is. Fear hides itself in many different guises, including jealousy; greed; anger; addiction; chronic lateness; talking too much; talking too little; overeating; aggression; depression; aloofness; the need for the limelight; workaholism; over-protectiveness; right-wing fundamentalism; body modifications; bravado; all of which can be manifestations of fear and can have an undue hold over us. In 1933, when FD Roosevelt took the oath to become the 32nd president of the USA, he declared, “So first of all let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyses the needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” Fear is serious business. If we give it permission, it will, cripple our relationships and shackle our potential for God.

Just as we often fail to recognise fear for what it is, we also fail to recognise the true nature of courage. Too often, we associate courage with heroic acts. The author Brené Brown coined the phrase “ordinary courage” to refer to our willingness to put our vulnerability on the line in the face of life’s challenges. Ordinary courage is making plans for your children after a diagnosis of terminal illness; applying for another job after redundancy; speaking out even if your voice shakes; the first date after a divorce; trying for a baby after a miscarriage; making a call to a friend who has suffered a bereavement.

Ordinary courage is about engaging with life in spite of its difficulties. It is choosing what’s right over what is convenient. It is demonstrated in the choice to live authentically when the world tries to squeeze us into its mould. It is the commitment to live in our integrity and be true to our values. It is ordinary courage that lays a foundation for healthy relationships because relationships cannot thrive or survive in a atmosphere of fear and suspicion.

1 John 4:18 states, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears [or he who becomes a slave to fear] has not been made perfect in love” This doesn’t mean that we will never

experience fear, but our security in His love will give us victory over our fears. Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27). That presents us with a choice - and it's a life-or-death choice, because if we are living in fear, we're not living - we're just existing! We can either live our fears or live our dreams. Jesus also said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

Dawna Markova said it well when she penned:

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.