

Unitarian Universalists offer insights into the cultural and personal sources of fear

By [Neil Shister](#)

What are we afraid of? How can we distinguish legitimate fears from the anxieties, worries, and dread that others try to manipulate in us? With our nation embroiled in a “war on terrorism” and an intensely divided presidential campaign, there may be no better time to ask.

Yet even when the cultural climate is not in a perpetual state of orange alert,” telling the difference between real and manufactured fears presents a fundamental spiritual challenge.

Fear is not easy to talk about. We live in the “home of the brave”: our public culture celebrates courage, optimism, and self-confidence. Therapists help many people learn to name their fears in the secure setting of a private office, and sometimes friends and families and religious communities help put public words to private fears. More often, however, we try to keep our fears out of other people's sight.

Out of sight, though, most definitely is not out of mind. What's most debilitating about our fears isn't that we don't talk much about them. It's that our fears damage us before we even recognize they are there. Whether they are internal, rooted in long-ago personal experiences burrowed deep in psychic space, or external, drilled into us by powerful forces aimed at creating collective anxiety, our fears almost always wear disguises. Many people who deal with fear's consequences—counselors, ministers, sociologists—express a shared urgency that few tasks are more important to our spiritual and political well-being than unmasking fear and charting the territory it so vigorously patrols.

The November election is bearing down on us in an era already deep in the fear loosed by terrorism. Republicans and Democrats are spending unprecedented sums for campaign ads, broadcasting a blizzard of political messages that appeal to our fears: Don't risk our nation's security—and yours—by changing commanders-in-chief in midwar, say Republicans. The Iraq war is creating more terrorists and endangering our nation, so re-electing the president who started it threatens us all, say Democrats. These messages compete for our attention amid ominous background noises from our own government warning of further attacks.

Living in a fearsome world is nothing new, of course. In the last century, two horrific world wars and the threat of Cold War nuclear annihilation haunted American life. And personal fears—about social acceptance, individual worthiness, even existential uncertainty—have afflicted people in every age. But never before have the media been so pervasive or the manipulative skills of professional message-shapers more sophisticated. Yet fear does not get the last word. Unitarian Universalists have insights into transcending our culture of fear.

Our culture is disproportionately shaped by media, notably television. And like fish that don't realize they are swimming in an ocean (one of Marshall McLuhan's astute images), many of us fail to appreciate the extent of the media's influence on the constructed reality we swim in. In my years as a television critic, I watched how the medium shapes our subliminal consciousness by framing messages in ways designed to persuade us. One fundamental approach is to render audiences frightened, making them more suggestible, as a prelude to the sales pitch of commercials.

But does TV make us afraid? Consider the evidence. By age 18 the average American child will have viewed approximately 200,000 acts of violence on television. That translates into at least thirty exposures every day. Nine years ago, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a health warning to its doctors that "exposure to violence in media [poses] a significant risk to the health of children and adolescents" and contributes to "fear of being harmed." The story is similar for adults. According to the American Psychiatric Association, "Individuals with greater exposure to media violence see the world as a dark and sinister place . . . and overestimate their chance of being involved in violence."

When I worked for the world's biggest public relations firm, the C.E.O. at the time was fond of instructing those of us charged with finding new business that the best tactic when pitching prospects was first to scare them with dire descriptions of awaiting dangers, then show them how those dangers would be alleviated once they hired us. Marketing has long regarded this as a fertile approach, both for business-to-business sales and for pitching the retail goods that fuel our economy.

According to one business school theory of persuasion, a convincing marketing message "scares the hell out of people; offers a specific recommendation for overcoming the fear-aroused threat; the recommended action is perceived as effective for reducing the threat; and the message recipient believes that he or she can perform the recommended action." Here's an example of that kind of pitch, from an ad for absorbent underpants marketed as something for child bedwetters to wear at sleepovers: "For him there is nothing worse than waking up cold, wet and alone. Except waking up cold, wet and alone surrounded by friends."

"Advertising is lying, not because it literally is, but because it suggests terribly destructive untruths to us," said the Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell in a recent sermon to the First Unitarian Church in Portland, Oregon. "We are told time and time again, in message after message, that if we don't have this or that, we will not be loved. . . . The lie—and it is a big one—is that these things will bring you love, acceptance, peace, a respite from your terrible longing and loneliness—and they will not." Further, she said the problem is not limited to the world of advertising: Institutionally sanctioned "non-honesty" is eating away at the integrity of American society.

“TV is a 'startle' medium,” according to Lawrence Harris, a senior advertising executive who asked that his agency not be named. But he doesn't see fear as a primary tool in his industry's arsenal. Pharmaceutical companies emphasize frightening symptoms in their ads, he explained, not because they want to scare us, but because we won't pay attention otherwise. “Disease-states make people pay attention. You've got to give people some idea of the symptoms so when they go to their doctors they inquire about a certain condition.” Ads don't work merely by suggesting danger, he argued, especially fabricated or exaggerated ones. Or at least they don't anymore. Why? “There are too many lawyers involved.”

Perhaps. But to the unschooled eye of the ordinary viewer, it's easy to believe that the medium is inundated with suggestions of things to fear.

Commercial advertisers are comparatively subtle compared to their political counterparts. Commenting on the dominant tone of the administration's political commentary, Harvard psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton told *Salon* in April that “I think they deliberately emphasize 9/11, and have turned post-9/11 fear into a political weapon. They assert that the absence of terrorist activity is due to their show of strength, but at the same time, they feel the need to mobilize fear and emphasize the threat in order to sustain their image as the great protectors.” The administration's opponents, meanwhile, encourage fears that President Bush's policies will result in the loss of ever more jobs, among other dire possibilities.

Fear-mongering is nothing new in politics. In 1964, the incumbent President Lyndon Johnson's famous “daisy commercial”—which showed a young girl playing in the foreground as a mushroom cloud formed behind her—clearly suggested that the election of Barry Goldwater could unleash nuclear holocaust. The ad was so controversial that it was quickly pulled off the air. Four decades later, however, the tradition of the “attack ad” is standard fare, designed to suggest that awful things will ensue if the other side gets elected.

Portraying one's opponent as a figure to be feared is hardly uncommon, according to California Republican political consultant Wayne Johnson, vice president of the American Association of Political Consultants. It is a double-edged sword, however. “If you're going to discuss something in which fear is part of the argument, it better be real,” Johnson said. “Trying to manufacture fear is going to backfire if voters believe a candidate is pandering or trivializing. Authenticity and genuineness have never had a higher premium than today.”

In exploring today's landscape of fear, I consulted Unitarian Universalist leaders including the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City and author of *Freedom from Fear: Finding the Courage to Love, Act, and Be*, and the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, theologian and president of the Unitarian Universalist Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California. Both agreed that confronting fear is ultimately an exercise in personal truth-seeking and courageous soul work. This can be a painful process. Carefully crafted protective disguises have to be stripped away, not always willingly. “People don't come

in and say 'I'm afraid,'" Church observed. "But so much of counseling these days is uncovering a deep foundation of fear that is retarding and restricting the free development of their lives." Francis Moore Lappé, who credits her Unitarian Universalist upbringing for the worldview that undergirds her work, including her landmark book *Diet for a Small Planet*, says that she learned to confront her own fears in the midst of devastating personal circumstances. In her new book with Jeffrey Perkins, *You Have the Power: Choosing Courage in a Culture of Fear*, she tells the story of how in a brief period her longtime marriage ended, economic circumstances forced a move from her small Vermont town to a big city where she knew nobody, and then, in what she called a "worst-case crescendo," she was diagnosed with a life-threatening disease. Her tale sounds like a latter-day version of Job.

In an interview, she said the experience of feeling so alone brought her to a new threshold in understanding fright not only in her own life but also in cultural messages: "The root of so much fear is fear of rejection and banishment. To be expelled from the tribe," she explained, referring to the evolutionary era that produced the nervous system that still governs our fear, "is death. Acknowledging fear is allowing our own sense of inadequacy to be perceived by others. We so desperately need each other's approval."

To acknowledge fear, to discard the carefully constructed roles and behaviors we use as disguises, "throws us on the outside," Lappé said. It feels like a declaration that we are flawed, inadequate in some fundamental way, even unworthy of being included within the circle of society. "We put ourselves in social jeopardy and invite contempt. That's the bad news."

But here's Lappé's good news: Fearfulness needn't be permanent. Indeed, she said, moments of fear can themselves become invitations to growth. Instead of harbingers of dread and passivity, Lappé came to see them as cues for action. "Fear doesn't necessarily mean 'stop,'" she said, "it can mean 'go.' Those uncomfortable sensations are telling you that you are in entirely new territory. Once you're really able to walk in your fear, you start reaching out to people who will encourage and embrace the truer you. You start to realize that 'I'm going to draw people to me who will honor me rather than dismiss me.'"

If Lappé's approach is autobiographical and anecdotal, Forrest Church's is analytic. "Never," he said when we spoke, "have I encountered a higher general fear level." The 9/11 attack accounts for some of this, he said, but he attributes more of it to a pervasive cloud of uncertainty hovering over the social landscape. "To the extent that we don't know what the future bodes and obsess about not knowing, we become possessed by fear," he said. "With the growth of uncertainty comes an opening to fear." And when fear takes over, he cautioned, "we can be driven very easily into robotic compliance by the lesser angels of our nature."

In order to render these feelings more manageable, Church classifies them in a five-part taxonomy. Fright, he writes, is our most direct experience, an instinctive fear from physical danger centered in the body. Worry resides in the intellect. Guilt is fear rooted in a troubled

conscience. Insecurity is centered in the emotions. Dread, the most amorphous, has no fixed object but rather a general anxiety of not being in control.

Fear in Church's scheme is very much part of the human condition. "We're more afraid of failure than we are eager for success," he said. "More afraid of pain than eager to seek pleasure. More afraid of embarrassment than willing to take chances on new experiences." In sum, the blandishments of fear suit what he calls "our timorous personality." Yet it is precisely when we overcome those blandishments that "all of the amazing things in our life happen." The other side of fear is freedom. And freedom is driven, finally, by faith in the future. "We're typically balancing competing claims of security against liberty," Church said. "But ultimately you have to sacrifice safety." There is no such thing as absolute security in his lexicon. "As human beings we are sentenced to death and sentenced to life at the same time." The option Church advocates: choose life.

Rebecca Parker's turning point was part of what she calls trading a heart of fear for a heart of joy. Her passage through fear was a feminist's journey. Terrorized as a child, she submerged her wounds "like an oyster forming a pearl around a piece of sand" and created, in her words, "a high-functioning, cheerful human being around a core injury." Not until her late twenties, as she began confronting long-buried experiences, did she dare ask herself, "What has made you so afraid?" In one stark moment of self-realization during a 24-hour silent retreat, she said, Parker found herself unexpectedly writing in her journal that "the motivating center of my life is fear."

"I spent the next twenty years of my life," she said, "unpacking what that realization meant through a long, arduous journey to face internally what that fear was and resolve it." This led to what she calls a feminist's awareness that power and exploitation are constant realities that are to be consciously resisted rather than feared. "I'm one of those people who didn't experience the world as any more frightening on September 12 than it was on September 10," she said. "That's because I already experienced the world as a place where life is at risk in significant ways."

Rather than be diminished by this realization, however, she was empowered. "Becoming aware of the way we have been made to feel afraid," she said, "is an important step in resisting oppression." It helped her shift energy into advocacy, to "get beyond a focus of what we're against to a focus of what we're for."

In the end, as with Lappé and Church, Parker's exploration inward enabled her to find her motivating center: "If you care deeply about life, if you have a heart of love and a sense of the sacred, you are going to come up against the ways life is at risk. You just are. If you are numb to the ways life is at risk, you lose track of your love for life. Facing into fear is a spiritual task."