

Can I Be Fearless?

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*Fear is the cheapest room in the house.
I would like to see you living
in better conditions.*

Hafiz

Human history is filled with stories of countless people who have been fearless. If we look at our own families, perhaps going back several generations, we'll find among our own ancestors those who also have been fearless. They may have been immigrants who bravely left the safety of home, veterans who courageously fought in wars, families who endured economic hardships, war, persecution, slavery, oppression, dislocation. We all carry within us this lineage of fearlessness.

But what is fearlessness? It's *not* being free of fear, for fear is part of our human journey. Parker Palmer, an extraordinary educator and writer, notes:

“Fear is so fundamental to the human condition that all the great spiritual traditions originate in an effort to overcome its effects on our lives. With different words, they all proclaim the same core message: “Be not afraid.”

. . . . It is important to note with care what that core teaching does and does not say. “Be not afraid” does not say that we should not *have* fears—and if it did, we could dismiss it as an impossible counsel of perfection. Instead, it says that we do not need to *be* our fears, quite a different proposition.”

If fear is this fundamental to being human, we can expect that we’ll feel afraid at times, perhaps even frequently. Yet when fear appears, we don’t have to worry that we’ve failed, that we’re not as good as other people. In fact, we’re just like other people! What’s important is to notice what we *do* with our fear. We can withdraw or distract or numb ourselves. Or we can recognize the fear, and then step forward anyway. Fearlessness simply means that we do not give fear the power to silence or stop us.

In my own experience, I think there’s an important difference between courage and fearlessness. Courage emerges in the moment, without time for thought. Our heart opens and we immediately move into action. Someone jumps into an icy lake to save a child, or speaks up at a meeting, or puts them self in danger to help another human being. These sudden actions, even if they put us at risk, arise from clear, spontaneous love.

Fearlessness, too, has love at its core, but it requires much more of us than instant action. If we react too quickly when we feel afraid, we either flee or act aggressively. True fearlessness is wise action, not false bravado or blind reactivity. It requires that we take time and exercise discernment. Zen teacher Joan Halifax speaks about the “practice of non-denial.” When we feel afraid, we don’t deny the fear. Instead, we acknowledge that we’re scared. But we don’t flee. We stay where we are and bravely encounter our fear. We turn toward it, we become curious about it, its causes, its dimensions. We keep moving closer, until we’re in relationship with it. And then, fear changes. Most often, it disappears.

I've heard many quotes from different traditions that speak to this wonder of fear dissolving. "If you can't get out of it, get into it." "The only way out is through." "Put your head in the mouth of the demon, and the demon disappears."

Some of my best teachers about fearlessness are part of a global network of younger leaders (in their teens, twenties and thirties) with whom I've worked for several years. They call themselves "Walk-outs." They walk out of work and careers that prevent them from contributing as much as they can, they walk out of relationships where they don't feel respected, they walk out of ideas that are limiting, they walk out of institutions that make them feel small and worthless. But they don't walk out to disappear--they *walk out to walk on*. They *walk on* to places where they can make a real contribution, to relationships where they're respected, to ideas that call on their strengths, to work where they can discover and use their potential.

From these younger leaders, I've learned the importance of asking periodically, "What might I need to walk out of?" It's a big question and it demands a lot of bravery to even ask it. By posing this question, we're being brave enough to notice our fears and see them clearly. We're being brave enough to recognize where we're called to be fearless in our own lives. This powerful question helps us discover the places, the work, and the relationships that we need to *walk on to* in order to realize and offer our gifts.

I hold a vision of what's possible if more of us are willing to practice non-denial, if we look clearly at what frightens us in our personal lives and in our society. With clearer vision, we could walk through our fear and say "no" to what disturbs us. We could walk on and take a stand. We could refuse to be cowed or silenced. We could stop waiting for approval or support. We could stop feeling tired and overwhelmed. We could trust the energy of 'Yes!' and begin to act for what we care about.

Fearlessness offers us a great blessing -- the strength to endure and persevere. In late 2004, the Ukrainian people protested a fraudulent election that had denied them the president they knew they had elected, Vladimir Yushchenko. They wore orange scarves and waved orange banners, becoming known as the "Orange Revolution." Their tactic was simple: Go into the streets and stay there until you get what you need. Refuse to give in, don't stop protesting until you accomplish your goal. Their example of persevering protest inspired citizens in many different countries (as far away as Ecuador and Nepal) to take to the streets and stay there until they got what they needed.

Today, in this troubled world, we need all the gifts that fearlessness offers us—love, clear seeing, bravery, intelligent action, perseverance. Fearless, we can face our fear and move through it. Fearless, we can reclaim our vocation to be fully human. Fearless, we can bring into being the world that Paulo Freire dreamed for us all, "a world in which it will be easier to love."

I Want to Be a Ukrainian

Margaret Wheatley ©2005

When I come of age
 When I get over being a teen-ager
 When I take my life seriously
 When I grow up

I want to be a Ukrainian.

When I come of age
 I want to stand happily in the cold
 for days beyond number
 no longer numb to what I need.

I want to hear my voice
 rise loud and clear above
 the icy fog claiming myself.

It was day fifteen of the protest, and a woman standing next to her car was being interviewed. Her car had a rooster sitting on top of it. She said "We've woken up and we're not leaving till this rotten government is out." It is not recorded if the rooster crowed.

When I get over being a teen-ager
 when I no longer complain or accuse
 when I stop blaming everybody else
 when I take responsibility

I will have become a Ukrainian.

The Yushchenko supporters carried bright orange banners which they waved vigorously on slim poles. Soon after the protests began, the government sent in thugs hoping to create violence. They also carried banners, but theirs were hung on heavy clubs that could double as weapons.

When I take my life seriously
 when I look directly at what's going on
 when I know that the future doesn't change itself
 that I must act

I will be a Ukrainian.

"Protest that endures," Wendell Berry said, "is moved by a hope far more modest than that of public success: namely, the hope of preserving qualities in one's own heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiescence."

When I grow up and am known as a Ukrainian
 I will move easily onto the streets confident
 insistent happy to preserve the qualities
 of my own heart and spirit.

In my maturity I will be glad to teach you
 the cost of acquiescence
 the price of silence
 the peril of retreat.

"Hope," said Václav Havel, "is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out."

I will teach you all that I have learned
 the strength of fearlessness
 the peace of conviction
 the strange source of hope

and I will die well, having been a Ukrainian.

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Margaret Wheatley writes, teaches, and speaks about how we might organize and accomplish our work in chaotic times. She invites us to attend to the quality of our relationships to weather the increasing turbulence. She knows that whatever the problem,

community is the answer. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, a charitable global foundation that works in partnership with a rich diversity of people around the world who strengthen their communities by working with the wisdom and wealth already present in their people, traditions and environment. (www.berkana.org) She has written four books :*Leadership and the New Science (in twenty languages and third edition)*, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future (7 languages and second edition 2009,)* *A Simpler Way* (with Myron Rogers) and, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*. Her numerous articles appear in both professional and popular journals and may be downloaded free from her website.

www.margaretwheatley.com Wheatley received her doctorate in Organizational Behavior and Change from Harvard University, and a Masters in Media Ecology from New York University. She has been a global citizen since her youth, serving in the Peace Corps in Korea in the 1960s. She was a practicing consultant for 30 years to a very wide variety of organizations on all continents. She lives in the mountains of Utah; her large family is now dispersed throughout the U.S.

